BOOK GIRL

and the Undine Who Bore a Moonflower

MIZUKI NOMURA

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Mizuki Nomura

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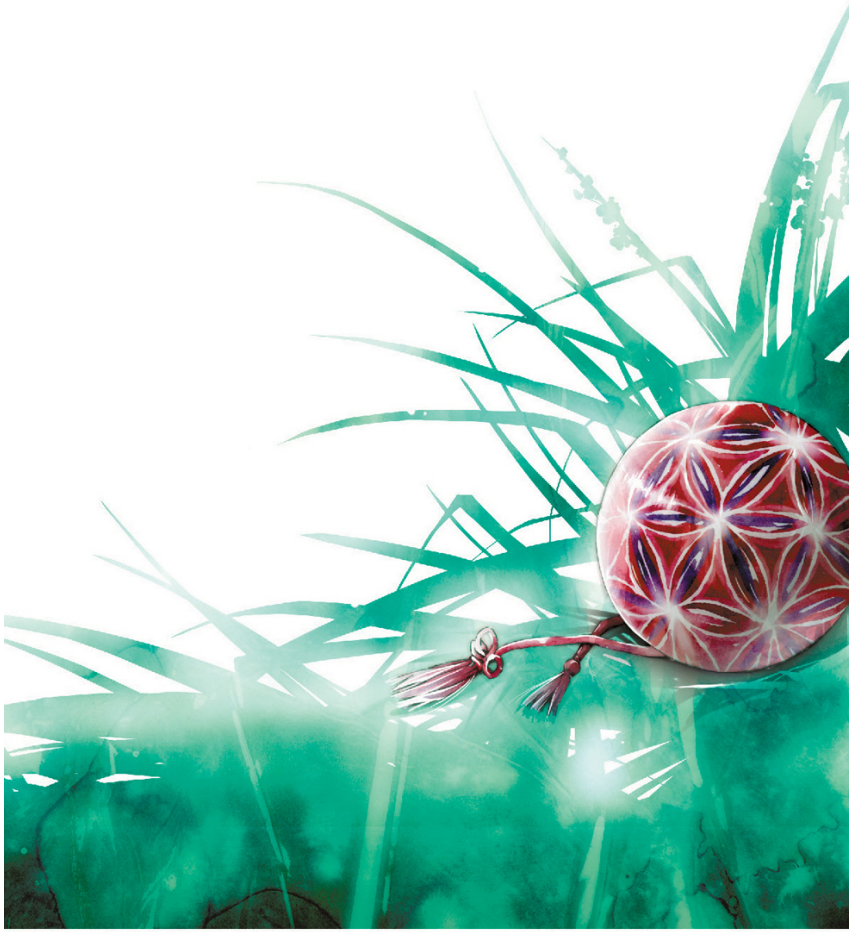


"I wish this fairy tale could go on forever.
"I will keep my promise.
"So I pray that we might be together the rest of my life."

Yes, as my swift days near their goal
'Tis all that I implore
Through life and death, a chainless soul
With courage to endure!
— Emily Brontë

When we were separated, she left behind pain that threatened to shred my heart, a slight resentment, and gentleness.

I never understood what she was thinking when she chose that path, and all that was left was to weep until my throat was raw. She herself probably couldn't have given me a clear answer about why she'd had to make such a painful choice.

Did she really have to do that? Couldn't she have chosen a kinder option? Then the two of us could have stayed in our happy dream without ever having to know that soul-crushing sadness. And yet Undine shook me with her gentle hand and roused me—why?

She had a secret.

She had nestled flowers and the moon in her heart.

For the longest time I didn't know that.

Prologue—Maki—Firefly
Nightfall/The Princess Speaks

I saw a god enraged.

The source of my grandfather's anger was unknown to me.

Mitsukuni Himekura was supposed to be a man who governed information, a man who wielded his power and issued orders however he wished, an arrogant man in absolute control.

As far as I was concerned, my grandfather was a god who would allow no contradiction. He was well over halfway through his seventies, but there wasn't the slightest hint that his physical or mental capacities had been compromised, and he gave off the impression that he had ruled the world since hundreds of years ago and that he would go on living into eternity.

Despite that, my grandfather's face was twisted hideously with humiliation, his one eye grew red and bloodshot, and his shoulders shook with rage.

Feeding the koi fish at the edge of a pond on a moonlit night, my grandfather's movements were violent and he looked as if he was venting his anger. Each time he cast a handful of food, the surface of the pond threw up rough waves that reflected the moonlight, and the koi fish that were my grandfather's pride felt their master's displeasure and twitched their red fins and swarmed away in suspicion.

I listened, holding my breath behind a pine tree, to the vengeful wail that spilled from his cracked lips.

"…That blasted Shirayuki…the promise…is still going?"

Shirayuki? And what promise?

Ignorant of it all, I felt something move deep in my chest like the dark surface of the water.

My grandfather fell into silence after that and continued throwing food to the fish. My skin prickling with tension, I left that place as silently as possible.

That happened during the summer when I was about to turn eighteen.

One night several days later, I turned eighteen and we held the kind of ostentatious party my grandfather loved on the grounds of the estate.

Most of the guests who'd come to the vast and garishly lit garden were company people much older than myself, and it was obvious that they had come not to celebrate my birthday, but to pay their respects to my grandfather. It was dismal keeping my smile in place and responding to the people I was meeting for the first

time who told me, “Happy birthday,” so courteously. Because they could carry out their duty by being friendly to the little girl just once, but I had to act cordial and repeat, “Thank you,” over and over until the party ended.

And when a lot of people got together, I started to hear things I didn’t want to.

For example, how my mom had cast off her husband and child and gone back to her native England.

What it might mean for the Himekura family if the child of a woman like that took charge.

That Mitsukuni Himekura, who was obsessed with bloodlines, had made a fine bungle of things by approving the marriage of his only son to a woman of foreign ancestry and a common family, or that no, she was an evil woman who had duped the heir of the Himekuras by getting pregnant, then forcing the marriage. That they’d heard she had demanded alimony even though she was the one who’d left.

I mean, seriously, you get tired of hearing the same things for years on end.

But even if that’s what I’m thinking, I can’t show it on my face, and I have to pretend that I can’t hear what they’re saying. Putting on a lofty smile, untroubled, unshaken by anything, like the noble young lady of a good family. That’s what my grandfather and the people around me expect of me—Maki Himekura.

So I must clothe myself in a shiny silk dress and smile more beautifully and bewitchingly than anyone else here.

“Maki, I’ve heard that you’re the conductor of your high school’s orchestra.”

“Yes, at my grandfather’s request. It’s tradition for a member of the Himekura family to act as conductor in the orchestra.”

I responded just enough to avoid being rude, but I was fed up and bored.

The person in front of me right now, with a champagne glass in one hand and a polite smile on his face, was the son of the president of some financial group or other.

He was a third-year in college, three years older than me, a pampered son with the blood of an illustrious house and a family line older than the Himekuras even—the man my grandfather had selected as my future husband.

I don’t have any dreams about love. There’s no man I’m crazy about, and since marriage is nothing but a contract between men and women, I don’t care who it is as long as they abide by the conditions I set. A Don Juan who flits from woman to woman like Ryuto Sakurai is out of the question.

It’s just, whenever I wondered whether Grandpa chose the scion of an impeccable family tree because his grandchild has inferior blood, it made me feel so irritated that the pit of my stomach seemed to bubble and roil.

Whether my mother’s blood flowing in my veins was so intolerable to him—

Whether Himekura blood had to be blue and patrician—

Appearing unaware of my irritation, my grandfather was getting buttered up by the guests.

Seated in his chair, he was presiding over the gathering, as if flaunting that he was the person who stood at the apex of the grand Himekuras at this moment in time. No matter who came to greet him, he never stood up.

He wore a monocle over one of his eyes, the left one that had been damaged in a fire when he was young; the artificial lens glinted, but authority flashed like fire through his naked right eye. His face, too, though carved by wrinkles, was spilling over with power and purpose.

The woman hanging back beside my traditionally dressed grandfather was his secretary. I'd heard she was in her midthirties, but she looked younger. There were rumors that she was his lover, and I wonder if they're true. Her short-cut black hair, her smart, natural makeup, and her unadorned pants suit matched my grandfather's tastes. He hated women who wore heavy makeup and flashy dresses and called them low-class. He was probably prejudiced against the female sex itself.

"I don't want to talk business with someone wearing a skirt."

He would make that sort of bold proclamation, a person out of touch with his era. So the woman who worked closely with my grandfather had stopped wearing skirts, and her hair had gotten shorter almost naturally. Because if she wore fluttery clothes or painted her face in bright colors, it would put my grandfather in a bad mood.

I've always kept my hair long.

The hair I inherited from my half-Irish mother is as wavy as the sea, a translucent brown, and when the sun hits it, it's wreathed in a golden shine.

When he sees my hair, my grandfather knits his eyebrows in apparent disgust.

It's un-Japanese. It's unrefined. Why not dye it black?

I let those comments wash over me so as not to upset Grandpa's feelings too much, but I shake out my long hair more than ever in front of him. It was the sort of meager rebellion I could pull off.

A squat, middle-aged man approached my grandfather, all but groveling in front of him.

The guests murmured meanly.

"Well, well, if it isn't the head of the Kusakabes."

The Kusakabes are a related branch of the Himekuras, and until two generations before the current heads of the households, the Kusakabes had held sway. At the time, Grandpa had been young, and I'd learned that the head of the Kusakabes had worked as his chaperone. And yet now in their grandchildren's generation, the Kusakabes had toppled completely and they clung to my grandfather's aid to somehow preserve their family.

Kusakabe was known as my grandfather's dog.

My father was the same way.

My father, who was overseas for business, had gone against my grandfather once to marry my mother, but after she was abused and chased out of the Himekura family by my grandfather, my father's will to resist him was torn up by the roots. He no longer desired anything in life and refused to think for himself. Whether accepting himself as a vacant doll who moved its limbs according to my grandfather's will had given him psychological peace or not, my father showed no strong emotion ever on his face, and he seemed dispirited. It was as if he were living his life dead.

I wonder if someday my grandfather will pull out my fangs, too, as he did to my

father or to Kusakabe.

If I won't even feel irritation and become a doll my grandfather controls to live bound head to toe in chains.

Just imagining myself like that, I felt a shudder go down my spine and the core of my brain got hot and trembled.

No way! I won't turn out like my dad.

I won't surrender everything the way he did. I don't want to have my very soul be bound. That's not living. Death would be better.

Fiery hot rage and loathing rose up in me at the fact that I'm a Himekura, at the fact that I'm his grandchild. The fire smoldered in my throat and my annoyance accelerated.

Being a Himekura is an inescapable fact.

The purplish birthmark peeking out from the collar of my grandfather's kimono and the birthmark on the nape of my neck.

The mark, shaped like a fish scale and said to be proof that we're descended from dragons, proved the link between my grandfather and myself to a suffocating degree.

The mark is wreathed in heat, as if a brand had been pressed against my skin.

I felt my face tensing with the screams I was holding back and the pain that jabbed my throat. Why did I have to smile at a time like this?

The hordes that amused themselves with self-involved gossip, the airheads who continued their carefree conversations right in front of me, knowing nothing of the world—they were all worthless. I wished every one of them would vanish right this second. Better yet, I wished a flood would swallow the world and destroy everything! If that happened, I would laugh. Loudly. With all my heart.

Just as the raging black water was beginning to inundate my heart, the lights in the garden cut out.

The gossiping stopped, and gasps were heard here and there.

"Oh…fireflies."

The black wave pulled rapidly away from my heart.

Faint lights were shining in the garden.

Sweet little lights bobbing upward, exactly as if they had wafted up from the grass.

Lovely, glowing dots flared on the tips of the pine and maple branches, over the bridged pond, on the white tablecloths, on the hair and shoulders of the guests, and flickered with the brevity of life.

They weren't real fireflies. It was a performance using lights made to look like them.

But the particles of pristine, palely winking light purified the gathering and transformed it into a limitless space, guiding us to a dreamy impression of standing in the midst of a cloud of real fireflies.

I stood frozen, entranced, and couldn't help but remember the girl who had passed away only a month before.

Hotaru Amemiya.

The girl who had loved like a storm and who at the very end had given off a spectacular flash like lightning and passed away with a smile on her face.

I had watched her story all the way to her death. Something in my heart had idolized her, having in her breast emotions I would never possess. Though I was astounded by the inescapable resolution to her story, I couldn't help admiring and envying the girl who had stood behind her feelings to the end.

The chainless soul that I still burned for, that I still sought.

That introverted, kind girl showed me what it was.

Even though she appeared to be tossed about by fate, to be a prisoner to love and hatred, to be constrained in every way, Hotaru's soul had been free until the very end. She had shaken loose every restraint and taboo, had chosen the man she loved for herself, and had closed her eyes in his arms.

I don't think she had any happiness beyond that. Every time I remember Hotaru, I think that.

If I'd asked her whether she regretted that, she would probably have given me a gossamer smile and nodded her head.

Hotaru had loved one man to the point that it destroyed her, had lived freely and had died freely.

Compared to that, I…

The irritation that had receded momentarily began to smolder again in my heart.

Though I'm called the Princess at the school where my grandfather serves as director and I'm given a lot of special treatment, the real me isn't free at all.

What I do exercise is my grandfather's power and not my own. Even though I wanted to paint pictures, I was forbidden to join the art club. In exchange for being given my own workroom at school, I was forced to promise that I would join the orchestra and be its conductor.

Even though things are so suffocating and unavoidable, my grandfather is the one person I can't defy. With rage and despair that could have crushed my heart, I came to see firsthand what happened when my father raised the flag of rebellion against him.

So then would I be able to go on being a Himekura, obeying my grandfather's will forever?

Without ever loving someone the way Hotaru had? Would I marry the man my grandfather chose, add the fetter of wifehood, and live my entire life as a Himekura?

I might be freed if my grandfather died. But when would that be? Ten years from now? Twenty? That seemed like an absurdly distant future to me right now, and that monster looked as though he could live another hundred years.

Would I spend my life as a doll under my grandfather's command all that time?

No!

The scream almost tore my throat apart.

The light of the false fireflies flickering in the warm darkness of summer crept to my innermost heart, creaked against the door I was holding shut, and tried to throw it open.

The impassive scion said that he was going to his villa in Nice next week and would I like to go with him? I felt such loathing at the poverty of intonation in his refined voice that my skin crawled.

I made the excuse that there were guests I still had to greet and broke away, fleeing him.

I moved immediately toward a deserted area.

The false fireflies shone faintly on my cheek, my shoulder.

The waves that continued trembling in my chest would not calm. I felt as if I'd been punched in the head, and the mark at the base of my neck throbbed with fire.

Hotaru—the real firefly—had moved away somewhere far out of my reach. I could never again see her kind, timid smile. I could never watch over her fierce passion.

I'm alone here.

I wondered if that Ryuto Sakurai, who had gotten so frustratingly entangled with Hotaru, was experiencing this feeling of loss, this agitation that seemed to have torn my heart in two.

I had taken Ryuto to a hospital under the thumb of the Himekuras when he'd been stabbed by Hotaru, and while we tried to keep him under control so they could treat him, Ryuto had wailed, "I gotta protect Hotaru. I promised her. Lemme outta here!" his face wild, like a rabid dog's.

No, that three-timing, four-timing excuse for a man was probably just fine, chatting up some other girl right now. Because most importantly, he's free. Unlike me.

I felt suffocated, as if a huge hand were clamping down on my chest.

I hated the idea of marrying a man my grandfather chose for me.

You think I would go to Nice? I want to be free now. I can't wait so much as one more second.

But what can I do? Not as Mitsukuni Himekura's granddaughter—just Maki Himekura?

I came to a stop, as if I'd been shot.

The moon floated in the pond, and my face was reflected as hardened as an ogre's in the dark water.

This was where my grandfather had tossed food to the fish and let his anger flash.

Red fins wobbled at the bottom of the pond. I stared at them.

"Miss."

How long had I been standing here, frozen? A gentle voice that held intelligence called my name.

When I turned around, a tall man wearing a well-tailored suit was standing there. Takamizawa, my grandfather's underling. He had been my grandfather's secretary before, but now he filled the role of my chaperone and worked at the school.

"What's the matter? Do you feel ill?"

"No. I wanted to be alone."

“He won’t approve of the star of the party being absent.”

“I’ll go back soon,” I answered, collecting myself, though deep in my brain I was still thinking.

It had only been a short time since Takamizawa had become my chaperone. But I knew that he was an exceptional resource with calm amiability and levelheadedness.

Why had someone like him been let go from his role as my grandfather’s secretary and shuffled to school management? Even if he was the chaperone of the Himekura heir, I was still in high school and my father would still succeed my grandfather.

It would be a long time before I could become the head of the Himekura family, and if by some chance, my father or grandfather had a child and it was a boy… My grandfather was no big threat, but my father was still young, so it was entirely possible. If that happened, the leadership would probably pass to that child.

In reality, since my position was so precarious, Takamizawa was as good as a lady’s maid being assigned to me. How did he feel about that?

Even though he seemed unflappable, he might not be that way inside. In which case—

The mark on my neck that I shared with my grandfather stabbed me with heat again.

In order to become Elizabeth staring down the Spanish armada, I needed a Walsingham, a Cecil, a Drake.

Pushing back my confusion and fear, I turned to Takamizawa and donned a brave smile.

“I need to talk to you.”

Chapter 1—A Bad Person Abducted Me

I am myself but a tale of one line.

There was a man who told a companion that in a hovel by the water.

I'm tired of all the effort it takes to be a character in stories. If it absolutely couldn't be avoided, I just wanted to be a supporting character in a tepid, peaceful story so I could continue with my matter-of-fact life.

I had expected the summer of my second year of high school to pass that way, in an easy haze.

But then, with half of August gone by, for some reason I was standing on a mountain road canopied by trees and lit by the sunset, with a perplexed look on my face.

"I can't take the car any farther in, so I'll need to ask you to go on alone."

"Uh."

"It's a straight road, so I don't expect you'll get lost."

"Mr. Takamizawa, I'd like to…"

Go home.

I mean, why did I have to get taken from Tokyo for hours in a car to the middle of the mountains in the northwestern countryside?

Takamizawa gently interrupted me from the driver's seat of the limousine.

"When you get there, tell them that you've come from Tokyo and give your name and the name of your school."

"Why do they need the name of my school?"

"Simply to amuse them. Then tell them this."

The words Takamizawa produced were even more cloaked in mystery.

"Can you remember that? It's very important, so tell them exactly that without any mistakes."

"What's so amusing about that? And anyway, why am I—"

"I'm sorry. I have to be getting back, so I need to excuse myself now. It gets very dark here at night, and it can be dangerous, so please don't dawdle."

Takamizawa smiled peaceably and then left.

With a travel bag stuffed with a change of clothes in one hand, I watched the limousine grow ever smaller, my face an utter blank.

I wanted to go home, but I didn't know the way. Aside from the narrow road I now stood on, there were only trees and grass growing as far as I could see. I couldn't spot a train station or a bus stop anywhere. The day was darkening rapidly, and the landscape was dyed the colors of twilight. Perhaps because I was in the mountains, the air was growing chilly as well.

Without any other options, I began walking down the unpaved dirt road.

"She is definitely going to hear about this."

Sweat broke out on my fevered body.

The place I finally arrived at was a timeworn Western-style mansion that seemed as if it would fall into ruin at any moment, like the House of Usher in the Poe story.

It was the mystical hour when spirits walked the earth in the gloaming. The ridiculously huge sun tinged the light scarlet as it sank behind a Gothic building.

Unlike in Poe's story, there were no cliffs or bogs around it, but shadowy trees like a flock of ghosts surrounded it and ivy crawled thick over its walls. There were carvings on the gate, and the building was darkly drab.

While sharply experiencing the unbearably melancholic emotions and absolute gloom of the soul that had assaulted the main character the instant he saw the House of Usher, I stood before the imposing iron gate and looked in at the yard through its bars.

I saw a tiny girl kneeling before a small stone shrine with her hands pressed together.

She might have been in her fifth or maybe sixth year of elementary school…?

Her hair was pulled into two ponytails, and she had a white apron on over her kimono. There was a maid's white headband in her hair—was she working at this estate? A little girl like her? What year was this?

A stone shrine that seemed to hold a story behind it. A girl praying fervently with closed eyes, looking as though she had just escaped a turn-of-the-century café. I was caught up in a perilous, dreamlike sensation at the unusual scene rising up in the mistiness of twilight.

Just then, a black mass burst through the air with a whoosh and ran toward me.

The pure-black shepherd dog looked as if it had been cut out of the darkness. It thrust its nose through the bars and barked at me with incredible energy.

The girl lifted her face and looked at me, too.

Her eyes opened wide.

I remembered what Takamizawa had told me and hurried to introduce myself.

"Excuse me, I'm Konoha Inoue from Tokyo. I'm a second-year at Seijoh Academy. I came here because I heard there's something I'm looking for here. Is the master of the house available?"

I saw surprise and fear come sharply over the girl's face and I jumped.

She was looking at me as if I were a monster, and her lips were trembling slightly, as if she was fighting back how close she was to screaming.

The next instant, she turned her back on me and darted off like a wild rabbit, disappearing into the building in the blink of an eye.

"Hey! Wait!"

I gripped the iron bars and craned forward.

Instantly the dog started barking at me—*hwoof! hwoof!*—and almost got his teeth in my leg. I leaped back in a panic.

Now what?! She must've thought I was an intruder. Even though all I said was what Takamizawa had told me to.

The dog was barking, his fangs bared. Why did these things happen to me?

As I was standing there, at a total loss, the door of the mansion burst open and Tohko flew out, wearing a fluttering white dress.

She came running at me, her eyes shining, through the bewitching light of sunset. She'd let down her hair, which was always up in braids, and tied it back with a white lace ribbon. Her black hair swayed around her thin shoulders, describing gentle ripples.

"You *came*, Konoha! I've been waiting for you!"

Out of breath, Tohko pressed both hands to the gate.

It opened with a *clang!*

The dog leaped at me as if it had gone completely insane.

"Agh!"

"No, Baron! Konoha is a guest."

Tohko yanked the dog away from me. He growled in dissatisfaction, low in his throat, and glared at me.

"I'm so happy! I knew you would come, Konoha."

She grabbed my arm and dragged me to the front door excitedly. The smile she turned up at me was glowing and pretty, and what with her hairstyle and outfit, there was something of the young lady about her.

But I answered the bouncing book girl in my coldest tone.

"Someone came to my house to get me and brought me here by force."

"What? What? You didn't rush here after getting my telegram? And why are you acting so grumpy when we're seeing each other after so long? Aren't you happy to see the president you respect so much?"

She tugged repeatedly on my arm, as if making sure that *of course you are! You could shout at the setting sun any second now you're so moved by all this.*

My look grew even more bitter.

"Oh yes, I got your telegram."

A commemorative telegram for birthdays and anniversaries, with pressed flowers pasted onto it at that.

The August holiday of Obon was over, and summer break had been heading toward its latter half with a peaceful morning. I was in the air-conditioned living room of my house playing with my elementary school–aged little sister, just relaxing.

Ah, how peaceful things were without a club president always saying crazy things.

I was feeling that keenly as a voice—

"Mr. Inooooooue, telegraaaaam!"

—sounded at the front door.

My mother was busy with housework so I answered it for her. The telegram was decorated with a vivid pressed flower, and the name it showed was mine.

My birthday…was still a ways off.

The instant I opened it, despite my suspicion, I felt my head ache.

I've been abducted by a bad person.

Bring a week's change of clothes and homework and come save me soon.

Tohko

It made me light-headed, and I stumbled.

Tohko…what are you doing? Summer break is an important time for students taking their college exams.

And there's no address so I don't even know where you are. How am I supposed to go save you?

When I pointed that out…

"Oh? Really?" Tohko said in an offhand voice. "But if we have the bond of the book club, your spirit should have picked up on that much at least."

"The book club isn't a psychic fan club, so no, actually. Besides, even if there'd been an address, I would have ignored it."

"Meanie!"

Tohko turned a disapproving eye on me that seemed to suggest I was an ungrateful, coldhearted snake.

Of course, she had just about no grounds to criticize me. If I'd gone to save her because I'd gotten a telegram with a pressed flower on it telling me to, that would be insane. Plus, thinking back over all the messes Tohko had gotten me involved in up till now, I knew that staying home to help my little sister learn homework techniques was the right choice.

So then why had I come to this fishy-looking mansion in the middle of the mountains carrying a travel bag, you might ask. Because twenty minutes after I received the telegram, a car came to pick me up.

It was hot enough to set off heat waves, but without even a drop of sweat, dressed to the nines in a well-tailored suit, Takamizawa had greeted my mother, saying, "I will take responsibility for your son. Allow me to take him into my charge," with a truly serene and affable smile.

Totally won over, my mother said, "So my boy made friends with someone he can go visit and even stay the night!" and she packed a bag with my things and elatedly sent me off.

Unable to give much resistance, I was loaded into a sparkling limousine.

"Why do you always get me involved? Let me spend my summer break in peace at least."

Tohko glared at me with tears in her eyes at my indignation.

"You're awful! Awful! You're the only underclassman I have in the book club, so what else can I do?"

She was right. There were no members in the Seijoh Academy book club but me and Tohko. In which case, it was bizarre that the club still existed. But no, the real problem was that Tohko had forced me to join the club, and I had come this far without quitting.

Just then Maki appeared.

Her long, gorgeous brown hair was tied back messily. She wore a pair of pants with a loose, shimmery shirt and over that a simple work apron. She was grinning.

“Come in, Konoha. Welcome.”

“Actually, this is kind of a problem.”

Maki Himekura, the granddaughter of the school’s director who was known as the Princess to the other students, let my sarcasm wash over her unnoticed and gave me an elaborate shrug of her shoulders.

“Oh. Well, Tohko was throwing a tantrum and said, ‘If you don’t bring Konoha here, I’m *leaving!*’ And how could I, who loves Tohko with all of my heart, ignore her demands?”

Tohko turned bright red and argued.

“If you love me, how can you abduct me and hold me prisoner? Or make me dress up in humiliating outfits every day while circling around, leering.”

“That’s the price for all the information I’ve funneled to you up till now. You said you would rather die than model nude, so I let you split up your payments and everything. Or are you going to pay me back in a lump sum now? If you just take off everything you’re wearing and stand still for a second, your balance will be zero before you know it.”

“Urk…”

Tohko’s voice died in her throat as Maki put a taunting arm around her shoulder and drew her closer.

“We’ve still got today’s payment to do. I called Konoha for you, so focus on your work…”

“Eek! Maki, let go of me! Konoha, help!”

“All right, time to resign yourself to it. Oh, Sayo. Will you show Konoha to his room? He’s a very important guest, so be polite.”

Maki disappeared down a hallway, dragging Tohko with her, though she kept up her pointless struggle.

“…I can take your bag. Your room is this way, sir.”

A hand reached out from beside me and took hold of my bag.

“It’s you—”

It was the tiny maid I'd seen in the yard. She took my bag from me with a cold expression and walked off briskly.

"Uh, what about my shoes?"

"There's no need to remove them."

"I can carry my bag; don't worry about it."

"This is my job."

Despite how young she looked, her speech was formal. Or more like, it sounded as if she disliked me.

I hunched up my shoulders and followed after her.

Inside, the house was old and dark, just like the outside. The ceiling was high, and there were stairs laid with red carpet in the front hall. While we were climbing, I suddenly felt eyes on me, and when I turned around, I met several gazes.

Probably the people who worked in the mansion. A mature man in a black butler's suit, a middle-aged woman who looked like a housekeeper with an apron on over her kimono, an old man dressed in work clothes who looked like a gardener, and a young man wearing a chef's jacket. The four of them were looking up at me from behind doors or the edges of hallways, as if wary of me.

When my steps came to a startled halt, they hurriedly bowed their heads and said, "Welcome" or "We look forward to having you with us." Every one of them looked pale, and they were clearly tense.

Was there a reason for that?

Feeling unsettled, my spine thrumming, I was guided to a room on the second floor.

"You may use this room."

She really was brusque. Her face stayed taut and she didn't smile.

"Um, what's your name?"

"Uotani."

"Maki called you Sayo just now."

"Sayo is my first name. Why do you ask?"

She turned cold eyes on me that all but asked, "What does my name have to do with you?"

"N-no reason. Have you always worked in this house?"

"It's a part-time job during summer break."

"I see. That's pretty impressive for a little girl like you."

"I'm in middle school. I'm not a little girl."

"What? Middle school?! What year are you?"

"First-year."

I'd been convinced she was in elementary school!

But hey, wasn't it weird for a first-year middle schooler to be working as a maid? This wasn't the turn of the century. Maybe they just didn't have enough people to do the work. Though as far as I'd seen in the hall, they had more people than they needed… Or maybe at the opulent villa of a family like the Himekuras, they needed that many servants.

"Uotani, was that you praying at that little shrine before?"

"…What of it?"

There were barbs in her voice.

"When you saw me, you were surprised, but why? And the other people were too."

"…A student coming from Tokyo is unusual, that's all. This is the country. I'm sure everyone would do the same."

Was that really the reason? I wasn't convinced. But Uotani turned her face sharply away.

"Please make yourself comfortable until dinner," she said with a brusque whisper and left the room.

Uotani reminded me of my classmate Kotobuki. Something about the curt way she said things. In which case, maybe Uotani really did hate me.

As I was putting my luggage in order, thinking about things like that, Tohko came in on wobbly steps.

"Konohaaaa, I'm hungryyy," she appealed to me, slumping and burying her face in the bed, like a camel that had collapsed in the desert. "Write me somethiiiiing, write it, write it, write iiiiiiit. Nooooow. I was just about to eat *Manon Lescaut* by the Abbé Prévost in the clubroom when Maki burst in out of nowhere and kidnapped meee.

"I dropped my book, so I couldn't bring it with me. Ahhh, the love story of the sprite-like, capricious, adorable Manon and purehearted Chevalier Des Grieuuuuuuuuux…You get fed up with Manon's devilishness, since she's naturally unfaithful, but she's so cute. And Des Grieux who does nothing but get jerked around by Manon is a real thoughtless idiot who stains his hands in crime without a second thought, but then you get caught up in the suspense and can't put it down. You expect it to be the story of the lovers' downfall, and it's like sweet ripe figs sprinkled with so much whiskey it makes your tongue burn, then boiled up and served with bitter chocolate ice cream. The chewy flesh of the figs cloys to the tongue, and it's sooo good it makes your head spin.

"So why, why, why did I let go of it? I've regretted it so much it's even in my dreams. I tear up the pages and start to take a bite, but they get bigger and thicker like a canvas and I can't tear them anymore."

Tohko wept pitifully that all she had in her bag was Ogai Mori's *Takase River Boat*, and she'd started eating it but now only about half of it was left, so she'd been staving off starvation since coming by eating carefully morning, noon, and night, and how she'd been in a mood to nibble on sidenotes, and she hurried me along as I sat on the bed, set my fifty-page notebook on my knee, and scribbled out with a thick mechanical pencil an improv story like the ones she always made me write in the clubroom.

So this was why she'd summoned me here.

Tohko was a goblin who ate stories.

She tore up the pages of books and crinkled through them as she expounded joyously on the stories.

She herself would insist, "I'm not a goblin! I'm just a book girl," but however

you thought about it, when she ate it was ghoulish.

"If you were that hungry, you should've written something to eat yourself," I said coldly as my pencil moved. Tohko let out a pitiful sound, hugging her stomach and lying depleted beside me.

"Urgggggh… I wrote the scene of an epic battle between Captain Ahab and the sperm whale from Melville's *Moby Dick* and ate that. But something was wroooooooong. I meant to bite into a whale steak, but the flavor was like shreds of whale meat bobbing in a boil-in-the-bag curry mix! That right there is sacrilege against Captain Ahab."

"If what you wrote was the same as what he wrote, it should taste the same, right?"

"No! Even first-rate French cuisine is totally different when you partake of it in a restaurant playing classical music and the waiter brings it to you beautifully plated and when you eat it off of plastic wrap instead of a plate in a dingy apartment with a broken air conditioner."

Her refusal to compromise about eating could be called a strength or simple selfishness.

What would she have done if I hadn't come?

"Konoha, hurry…my stomach is collapsing in on itself."

A gurgling noise from her stomach followed her feeble voice.

I pulled out one page I had just finished writing and held it out to her.

"I'm not done yet, but here. I picked some appropriate prompts before I started. You can't complain, no matter what it tastes like."

"Thank yooooooooou."

Tohko took it in both hands and promptly sat up on the bed. She read it voraciously, tearing off edges and taking bites.

"Y-yummm."

She closed her eyes and whispered with a face totally at peace, then started in crinkling again dreamily.

"It's like clam chowder with plenty of clams and bacon in it. It has the taste of sweet milk. A kidnapped girl makes friends with her kidnapper and goes to visit her estranged mother, right? And the two of them get on a hot-air balloon. Ahhhhh, I can feel it seeping into the walls of my stomach, so waaaaaarm…"

Well, five-alarm spices dumped onto an empty stomach would've been too harsh.

Even so, as I wrote the second page, I murmured matter-of-factly, "That's because the prompts are 'kidnapping,' 'hot-air balloon'…and 'destruction.'"

The piece of paper Tohko had been trying to swallow caught in her throat, and she started coughing.

"No! Konoha, why would you go and make this fantastic soup spicy or bitter?! I like it the way it is."

I ignored her, beginning to tremble in terror at the thought of whatever horrible flavor it was going to transform into and kept on writing briskly.

In fact, there was going to be a sickly sweet resolution where the evil spirit of the criminal who'd plotted to make money with the kidnapping was destroyed, but I

wanted Tohko to get a fit retribution for summoning me into the mountains out of the blue.

I saw her eyebrows knit together, and she shook with fear, which made me feel a little better.

The suspicious behavior of the household bothered me, but if I prodded at it ineptly and Tohko stuck her nose into something strange again, it would just come back to bite me, so I'd stay quiet.

The next day, Tohko was engulfed in a huge amount of lace, like a French doll.

Her hair was loose again and hanging down her back.

There was lace at her collar, lace on her sleeves, lace on her skirt, and even the bonnet on her head was frills and lace all over.

"See that, Tohko? Konoha's here now, so try to be a little nicer."

From behind the canvas, Maki admonished Tohko, who was hugging the back of a chair and sulking.

I had been at the window listening to their conversation, disgusted.

"The hat is too heavy. It's giving me a headache. And the corset is laced too tight."

"Then why don't we have Konoha loosen the laces on your back? And really, I wouldn't mind if you went from there and took it all off."

"Wh-what are you suggesting?! I'm a modest and virtuous book girl, unlike *you*."

"My, my. And which book girl was it who decided to show up in a slip in front of Konoha?"

She brought up how Tohko had stripped right down to the limit before in exchange for information, and she grinned.

"I was surprised actually. I wondered if you'd purposely brought Konoha along because you wanted to show him how flat your chest was."

It was true…covered in her bra and slip, Tohko's chest had been pitifully flat.

"M-my chest doesn't have anything to do with it! Just because you're a little bit bigger, don't get a big head about it. And the reason I had Konoha there was because I didn't know what you would do once I took my clothes off if I was alone with you!"

"True. If it had just been the two of us, I might have lost all reason and attacked you."

"There! You've revealed your true intentions! I'm serious. I'm normal! I'm not going to reveal my naked body to someone who looks at me so creepily."

"Oh no. I should have kept my intentions hidden and then made my advances on you."

"Impossible. Your eyes have been hounding me ever since you first spotted me at the welcoming ceremony at school."

"That's because I fell in love with you at first sight. *Ah*, I thought, *I wish I could get her uniform off and draw every detail of her in her natural state*."

"Any high school girl who thinks like that first thing is messed up! It's not demure! It's not love. It's weird! It's perverse!"

My head started to hurt and I stood up.

"Konoha, where are you going? Stay."

"This has nothing to do with me."

If I kept listening to them talk, it would probably warp my view of women.

"Konoha, no! Don't *leave* me with this pervert!"

Tohko's shriek met my back as I left the room.

For crying out loud.

Feeling a faint fatigue, I descended the stairs and went out to the garden. The grass and branches of the trees grew freely, and weeds were growing in the flower beds. It looked as if the garden wasn't tended very often…Why was Maki staying at this villa? It would be hard to call it comfortable. Even though she could've been living it up with a high-end hotel for her house. And things had been unnatural in the first place, given how Takamizawa was talking.

I decided to head over to the stone shrine Uotani had been praying at the day before. This little shrine didn't mesh with the Western style of the mansion, either. What was it memorializing?

Huh?

I got an uncomfortable feeling on my back and turned around. There was no one there.

But the buzzing feeling didn't go away. When I stared intently at the building I'd just exited, I noticed something odd.

The roof, the color scheme, and the window frames on the right half of the mansion were subtly different from those on the left half.

It had been dim the day before so I hadn't noticed. It was unbalanced, like clothes sewn with different buttons on either side.

Why, I wonder…?

Suddenly a dog ran toward me, baying.

Ack! It was back! Apparently the shepherd named Baron was left loose on the grounds as a guard dog. Even if he was well trained, a dog that big was dangerous.

Baron was looking at me with his coal-black eyes and barking wildly. It seemed as if he would come leaping at me any second, and I retreated in a panic. As I was wandering near a storage shed at the back of the house, I caught the sound of a strange song.

A snake is in the swamp there.
Rich old spirit's little girl
Get you up and set a trap
A bead of water 'pon her neck,
Golden shoes upon her feet,
Call me this and call me that
To the mountain or the field, go, go, go…

What was this song…?

When I peeked behind the shed, Uotani was sitting under a large tree, leaning back against its trunk.

She was hugging an old ball covered in faded scarlet thread to her chest protectively, as if cradling a baby, her eyes closed, her lips moving ever so slightly.

A snake is in the swamp there,
in the swamp there.

The interlaced tree branches cast dark shadows over her tiny face.

Her voice, too, was desolate, as if she was weeping.

I stood there, knowing I should leave but unable to, and Uotani noticed me. She tightened her grip around the scarlet ball and glared at me coldly.

"I'm on my break. Can I help you?"

"Sorry. Baron was barking at me, so I came this way, and then I heard a voice…"

At that, Uotani started and pointedly asked me, "Did you try to leave the grounds?"

"Well…I thought I might go for a walk…"

"You should give up on that idea."

"Huh?"

"There's a pond *out there*. It's dangerous."

"A pond?"

I was confused as to why she was mentioning ponds all of a sudden. Uotani fixed me with a piercing stare and went on.

"Yes. It's very deep, and if you sink in, you'll get tangled up in the weeds and be totally unable to resurface. People have died in the pond. So please stay in the house."

Why was she giving me such a tense, grim look? It was as though she was warning me that if I left the estate, *I was guaranteed to fall into the pond.*

A sudden chill went down my spine, and I broke out in a sweat.

"Okay. The wind is picking up, so I'll go back to my room."

When I told her that, Uotani's gaze slid away.

"I'll bring you some tea soon."

"Thanks. Some cold tea would be great."

With a bow, Uotani left; I watched her go, bathed in the assault of the summer sun. The scarlet ball she hugged to her chest looked like a bouquet of spider lilies taken to a grave.

When I first caught sight of her, I thought she was like a flower.

The cool wind gently rustled the ends of her silky hair and the hem of her skirt. The air around her was the only thing that felt peaceful and kind, that looked totally different from everything else around it.

I wonder how long I gaped at her that day.

Standing rooted to the spot, as if time had come to a halt.

When she barely lifted her long lashes and our eyes met, I thought my heart would stop.

Her cheeks colored a faint crimson, and immediately after she broke into a gentle smile. I watched it happen, feeling as if I was in a strange dream.

I believe that I've been dreaming ever since.

This mansion really is odd.

A lot of time went by while I was shut up in my room writing Tohko's improv story for lunch, thinking over various things.

When it was almost noon, Tohko appeared with a sullen frown on her face.

"You're terrible, Konoha, turning your back on your president. How much do you think Maki sexually harassed me after you left? You're gonna payyyyy."

"That really makes you sound like a goblin."

"Urk…I-I'm not a goblin."

She was whining, but when I held the story out to her, her attitude instantly improved, and she started eating joyously.

"This is sooo good. It tastes like a freshly fried croquette sandwich! The prompts are 'a camel,' 'memorial,' and 'summer vacation,' huh? What a cute story. Even the bread is lightly toasted and crunchy. I forgive you for calling me a goblin. I'm *so* glad you came, Konoha!"

You're sure in a better mood…

"Mmph-mmph. I have to eat fast, or Maki's gonna come and call me for lunch."

"Wouldn't it be better for your digestion to eat afterward, slowly?"

"But I couldn't hold out."

Hurriedly gulping down the last scrap, Tohko smiled sunnily.

"Maki's going out tomorrow so I get a break from modeling. She said the other side of the mountain is opening up and it's a tourist spot now. Do you wanna go, Konoha?"

The memory of Uotani's warning not to leave the grounds and her cold expression flitted through my mind.

But if I refused, Tohko would probably sulk.

Maybe it's okay as long as we don't go near the pond.

And so the next day we scouted out Baron's feeding schedule so we could slip through the gates of the estate, then walked along a mountain road until we reached a cozy little town.

There was a train station and a bus stop here, and souvenir stands were lined up along the street.

"Ooh! A bookstore!"

Tohko ran off as if she'd discovered a stand selling dumplings at the end of our journey.

She was wearing a pristine white dress and ribboned sandals. Her hair was in its usual braids. Tohko had pouted early on. "You're supposed to wear your uniform

when you go out." Apparently Maki had made arrangements for all her clothes. "This was the simplest thing in the closet," she whined.

But the costume of a refined young lady at a summer resort suited Tohko, who was so thin and pale. The townspeople looked admiringly at the old-fashioned beauty walking with her thin fabric dress and long braids bouncing. Walking next to her, I felt pretty darn antsy, even though they were obviously not staring at me.

Tohko was totally insensible to the fact that she was being stared at by strangers, and she shot into the bookstore with a ravenous look on her face.

"Look, it's Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger*. Thomas Mann was a German author born on June 6, 1875. He's also famous for *Death in Venice* and *The Magic Mountain*. *Tonio Kröger* is one of his most famous works, and his conflict as an artist is its main motif.

"The main character, Tonio, admires his classmate Hans and the lovely blond girl Inge, but his feelings aren't reciprocated. It's like a heavy, baked cheesecake, its rich, acidic taste spreading sharply over your tongue and slowly melting away. There's a faint fragrance of lemons and whiskey, and it's philosophical but breezy. It can be tough to swallow even a little at a time."

She expounded as she flipped through the book, sounding as if she might rip it up and shove it in her mouth any second.

"Urk. They even have Goethe's *Hermann and Dorothea* and Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower*. And Fouqué's *Undine* and Hoffman's *The Golden Pot*! I wonder if the owner is a fan of German literature. The men who feature in German literature are so proud and totally inflexible, and because of that they're impressionable and wonderful. Ahhh, German…it looks so yummy… I wanna eat it."

"If you're gonna eat them, pay for them and take them home. Please."

She drooped instantly.

"I don't have any money. I only had 314 yen in my wallet."

"Oh yeah?"

"You still haven't given me a birthday present, Konoha."

"Was it your birthday?"

"It was! It's March 15."

"That's a looooooong way off, isn't it?"

"I'm saying, I want my present for this year."

Tohko pleaded, hugging the books fiercely to her chest. I sighed.

"Only three books."

"Thank you! Then I'll take the Goethe treasury on the very top of that shelf and __"

"Three *paperbacks*!"

Tohko muttered, "Cheapskate," but she soon started picking out books, murmuring affirmatively to herself. When she was done, she held out the three paperbacks with a childlike smile.

"I want these."

I took Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger*, Wilhelm Meyer-Förster's *Alt Heidelberg*, and Fouqué's *Undine* from her, and we went to the register.

Tohko stuck her head in from beside me.

"Can you gift wrap it, please?" she asked, her face beaming and her voice enthused.

The clerk took out some nice tea-brown wrapping paper and wrapped all three books up together, then tied a gold ribbon around the package, and put it into a paper bag with string handles.

When we moved outside, Tohko's face relaxed even more and a syrupy smile came over it.

"Thank you, Konoha. I'll cherish eating them."

"They're just going into your stomach anyway. What do you need a ribbon for?"

"No, I do! It's a present, after all."

Tohko was smiling brightly. Well…as long as the person getting the present was happy, I guess it didn't matter.

"Oh, let's go to a souvenir shop, Konoha. You're going to buy souvenirs for your family and friends, right?"

With that, she dragged me to a store.

"That's going to be tough with a budget of 314 yen, don't you think?"

"Urgggggh. Konoha, let me borrow some money!"

With the three thousand yen she got out of me by swearing she'd return it when school started, Tohko started meticulously selecting souvenirs for the family she was boarding with, for her friends at school, and so on.

Why do girls take so long shopping?

I picked out some plum-flavored crackers for my family and a stuffed rabbit for Maika and tried to move efficiently to the register, but Tohko looked at my hands and said, "Konoha, is that all? You don't need anything for your friends?"

"I don't know anyone I would bring back a souvenir for," I informed her flatly, and she leaned in toward me.

"What about Nanase? What about Akutagawa? You've been spending a lot of time with him lately. And there's little Chia, too."

"You're getting something for Takeda. Akutagawa and I aren't that kind of friends, and I think Kotobuki hates me."

Tohko's eyes went wide with surprise.

"What? But Konoha, didn't you get a postcard from Nanase over the summer?"

"Nope."

Why would I get a postcard?

Tohko folded her arms over her chest and hemmed, then soon lifted her head with a grin.

"Let's buy something for Nanase anyway. And for Akutagawa and Chia! It's important to build up a lot of little things for the people you talk to every day. There are romances and friendships that begin with souvenirs. Look, doesn't that dried persimmon look yummy?"

"What kind of romance starts with a dried persimmon?"

Even though I told her that all I needed was stuff for my family, she wasn't the type to back down. In the end, she burst out with her usual line, "It's an order from

your president," and I was forced to buy a ballpoint pen with a weird crab character on top of it for Akutagawa, a paperweight shaped like a baby bird for Takeda, and a traditional-looking phone strap with a small peach-colored woven ball on it for Kotobuki.

Akutagawa and Takeda were one thing, but when would I ever get the chance to give Kotobuki her souvenir?

The round-faced older man at the register had his lips curved in amusement, as if he'd overheard our discussion. I thought my face would catch fire while he was totaling everything up.

Tohko didn't even notice and struck up a conversation with the man.

"Excuse me, are there any sightseeing spots you would recommend around here?"

"In this area, there's nothing to see but the scenery. Though the leaves are wonderful in the fall. Where are you two kids staying?"

"We know someone who has a villa on the mountain. We're staying there."

The man reeled back suddenly and shouted, "A villa?! You don't mean the Himekura place!"

"Uh, th-that's right," Tohko answered with some confusion.

Instantly, eyes in the shop and on the street turned toward us and a fearful murmur began.

"She said she's staying at the Himekura villa!"

"What?! That evil house?! Isn't that where the oracle fought a ghoul and got devoured long ago?"

An oracle? A ghoul? What in the world?!

As I stood dumbfounded, even more unsettling words came crashing in on me.

"The Himekura estate where all those murders happened and turned it into a sea of blood?!"

"The place is still crawling with goblins and ghosts and whatever else, no? How terrifying! Those kids are gonna get cursed."

Tohko couldn't handle ghosts, and she started to look as if she might faint.

People were gathering on the street, and the sound of them talking grew louder and louder, and the reserve in their looks eroded until we were being treated exactly as if we were exotic animals in a freak show.

Gripping the plastic bag with our souvenirs inside and cutting through the crowd of people, we fled the scene.

Running beside me, Tohko was shaking her head weakly, half in tears, and shouting, "No! I *hate* ghooooooosts!"

Chapter 2—The Oracle Who Read from Books

"What did they mean about ghosts?! Tell me!"

Late that night, the moment Maki got home, Tohko chased after her, her braids flying.

"Okay, okay. I know perfectly well that you're afraid of ghosts, but don't be so cute when you're afraid. It makes me want to sweep you up in my arms."

"I-I'm not *afraid*! Only little kids get scared of ghosts."

Wearing a cardigan over her nightgown, Tohko planted her trembling feet and put on a show of bravery.

Of course, she was transparent to Maki, who sat down and crossed her legs on the sofa. She plucked up the sandwich and olives that Uotani had brought for her dinner, grinning.

"It's nothing at all to worry about. The rumors simply got blown out of proportion and passed on with exaggerations as a cursed mansion or an evil house. The part about the deaths happened almost eighty years ago. The rituals and renovations have all been done."

Tohko sucked in her breath with a squeak. And even though I had turned away because I'd said I didn't want to get involved, I leaned in closer.

"Is it true there were deaths?!"

Maki said simply, "Yes, six in all."

Six deaths!

Tohko's face stiffened and went rigid. I started to feel sick, too.

Maki was the only one enjoying herself. She took another bite of her roast beef sandwich.

"Well, that wasn't unusual before the war. It happened all the time."

"I don't think that's true! It wasn't the warring states, period—the democratic reforms at the turn of the century had already happened."

"Y-yeah. Konoha's right. Six deaths is incredible. What would someone have to do to get that many deaths?"

Maki sipped her tea elegantly, and after assuming an air of importance, she told us what had happened.

Close to eighty years ago, a young lady of the Himekuras had been convalescing at this estate in the remote mountains.

One day, a student called on the estate, and he fell in love with the young lady. The two spent their time together fondly, but one of the student's friends came to retrieve him, and the student left the young lady behind and went home.

It was said that she threw herself into a pond out of despair.

“I called her a young noble lady, but actually she was an oracle. Plus, a ghoul had been sealed in the pond.”

“Hold on. Is this a late-night cartoon show or something?”

I interrupted Maki in her casual retelling.

They’d talked about an oracle and a ghoul and whatever else in the town, too, but I’d been knocked so far off balance by it that my mind couldn’t keep up. Even though a goblin who munched on words was right in front of me.

Tohko frowned uncomfortably.

“You know there’s no such thing as ghouls. Stop messing around.”

I battled back the desire to make a comment. Was she not aware that she herself was a goblin?

Maki went on with a condescending look.

“Oh, really? But the Himekuras were originally a line of oracles. A beautiful oracle descended from dragons exterminated a ghoul who was harassing the capital, and she was granted a courtier’s rank by the emperor of the time. That’s how the Himekuras began. Thereafter, the Himekuras were made to preside over the waterways, and they went on to great success in the imports business. They say that oracles have appeared throughout the generations and that they’ve had ghouls in their employ and brought prosperity to the family.”

“That story sounds pretty suspect to me.”

Definitely…Plus, the holy and immaculate image of a maiden consecrated to the spirits didn’t fit Maki at all. It would have been more believable if she’d told us her family line had satanic blood in it or something.

Maki laughed brazenly.

“In any case, the young lady who was staying at the estate had the powers of the oracle and kept the ghoul sealed in the pond and under her command. The seal broke with her death, and the ghoul went on a rampage and slaughtered the servants who were at the estate.”

“So you’re saying it was the ghoul who caused the six deaths?”

“That’s what they say in the village. And I suppose since the young lady committed suicide, it was actually only five.”

Maki’s eyes narrowed in a tasteless smile, and her voice became suddenly obstinate.

“At any rate, the mansion was covered in blood and not a single person in it was left alive, and nobody knew who had done it. Apparently it was incredible to see. There were these sprays of blood all over the walls, and one body that had been split open the entire length of their face with a sickle, one that was impaled through the chest with a spade, one who’d been shot in the head with a gun, one who’d fallen down the stairs and broken their neck, and one who was lying there with foam coming out of its mouth.”

“Urk!”

All the color drained out of Tohko’s face. I knew she was picturing the scene in her mind with total realism. The image of the body with a sickle embedded in its throat came to my mind’s eye despite my better judgment, too, and I felt as if the

contents of my stomach were coming back up.

Unleashing the full force of her sadistic nature, Maki went on tenaciously.

"There are villagers who say they saw the ghoul crawl up from the lake and eat the young lady. They say that in the light of the moon, its long white hair stuck to its body, it gripped a tattered arm in its hand, and bright red blood was dripping from its hair and face. Its eyes burned with malice, and would you believe, it was said to scream, 'I will never forgive you!' in a terrifying voice and call a man's name."

"W-was the man the young lady's lover?" Tohko asked nervously.

"Yes. Perhaps her resentment had transferred to the ghoul.

"The next morning several bodies were discovered at the mansion, and the villagers who'd witnessed the supernatural event ran around saying, 'A ghoul came out of the lake!' 'The young Himekura lady was devoured by it!' 'There's no question! The servants were killed by the ghoul, too! It's a curse,' and the entire village descended into terror.

"They say the ghoul still haunts the mansion and pond."

"St-still?!"

Tohko shuddered and Maki smiled cruelly.

"That's right… Swaying its long snow-white hair and wearing a white kimono, it whispers, 'curse you…curse you…,' in a low, rasping voice. There are a lot of people who say they've seen a woman with white hair at the windows of the estate when the gates are supposed to be locked. Just recently, in fact—"

"T-t-t-t-trying to scare me isn't gonna work. Your story doesn't scare me at all."

As she said this, Tohko looked around jumpily.

Maki shrugged her shoulders grandiosely.

"I wasn't trying to scare you. It's giving us problems, too.

"We want to bulldoze the mountain and build a factory, but the residents in the area say we'll be cursed if we do something like that and they're strongly opposed to it. We've been hashing it out for a long time now. When talk about development became more concrete, there were fires and injuries popped up, so now if anything even remotely bad happens, it's all because of the ghoul. Even the fact that the construction supervisor's great-grandmother passed away at ninety-nine years old or that his son's wife cheated on him and left him or that the village head's cat had nine kittens—it's all because of a curse. I can't stand it."

She spoke in an exasperated tone, and then the edges of her mouth pulled into a sly grin. Her sensual lips curved, and her powerful eyes shone with formidability.

"And that is why I came here as my grandfather's proxy. In order to prove there's no such thing as this curse. If I, one of the Himekuras, have my friends come to the mansion where the violence played out and we have a great time without anyone getting sick or hurt, it should boost our image with the residents. It's a more meaningful summer vacation than hobnobbing in Nice anyway. If all goes well, my grandfather will owe me one, too. Not too bad."

So that was the reason Maki had come to this remote mountain.

Still frowning, Tohko furtively looked up at Maki.

"Is that why the people in the house are scared?"

Apparently Tohko had also noticed that the atmosphere in the mansion was strange, although it was so obvious that just about anyone would find it strange.

Maki answered flippantly, "Yup. They're probably thinking, *If something does happen, this time the ghoul's gonna eat* meeee."

"Don't blame everything on the ghoul! Besides, ghosts don't even exist."

Tohko's face flushed red with her resolute declaration.

"Well! I don't think it would be that strange if they did."

"They don't! Nooo way!"

Of course, that was because if ghosts did exist she'd be scared and then where would she be?

Maki grinned with the look of a predator closing in on her quarry.

My spine tingled with an awful premonition.

"Oh no? Then would you like to see if you can decipher the truth behind this case, book girl?"

Maki deftly held a diary out before Tohko's widened eyes.

"Are you really going to investigate an incident that's almost eighty years old? She's got you on a leash, I swear. It's like you're that ghoul under someone's control."

"I'm not a ghoul!" Tohko grumbled, tightly hugging the old diary with its cover the color of dark tea to her chest. As we walked down the chilly hallway, she became petulant like a child.

"I-I didn't accept in order to restore the ghoul's good name or because Maki fooled me, got it? If I refused the case, it would have looked like I was afraid of ghosts."

I considered telling her, *That's because Maki fooled you completely*, but it was pointless, so I didn't.

"I see. Well, do your best without getting cursed by any ghosts. I'm going to bed."

I didn't want to get involved, so I started bustling toward my room.

A foot behind, Tohko followed me like a duckling.

"Your room is over there."

"Er…"

She took hold of a small bit of my short sleeve with tears in her eyes.

"I'm not afraid of being alone, okay? Ghosts are a superstition so I'm totally fine…and I don't think a ghoul is doing bad things. It doesn't have the slightest effect on me, but…"

After her cheeks had colored and she'd made her mumbling excuses, she smiled coaxingly and showed me the diary.

"This diary by the young Himekura lady is written in a classical style that's pretty hard to read, so I'll translate it into modern words for you. Okay? You want to hear it, don't you, Konoha? So it's okay if I go to your room, right?"

…I *am* a guy, y'know.

Tohko had made her way into my room and was sitting on my bed with her legs

thrown every which way.

The canopied bed had a sprawling king-sized mattress so there was plenty of space, but that wasn't the problem. I was already in my pajamas and had turned out the lights and snuggled into bed. Onto this scene came Tohko, sitting beside my pillow with a spare blanket she'd dug up somewhere draped around her shoulders, and she began reading the diary by the light on the nightstand.

I wondered how it was that a girl her age could have so little caution.

At this proximity, where I could hear her breathing, Tohko's braids swayed right in front of me—they even smelled sweet like some kind of shampoo… What would I do if there was some kind of misunderstanding?!

But then, it was like a mother reading a picture book to a child before bedtime. It was humiliating.

My face burned. My ears tingled. My heart pounded ridiculously fast.

From overhead, her sweetly clear voice came down alongside the gentle fragrance of flowers.

"A volume arrived from father in Tokyo. Upon turning back the cover, I discovered a message from my father. Father's hand is dignified and beautiful, and it possesses a gentlemanly power. I gazed at it, and my breast swelled with happiness and remembrances of home.

"I wonder after the health of Father, Mother, and my younger siblings. Whenever a volume arrives, I feel happier and more excited than words can say, but this heightens my fondness for my family, and it feels as if I might break into tears. I want to go back to my home in Tokyo for two or three days only—no, for a day or half a day.

"But I must persevere. Because I made a promise to Father."

"The volumes Father was kind enough to send me today are Koyo Ozaki's The Golden Demon, *Ichiyō Higuchi's* Growing Up, *and Kyōka Izumi's* A Song by Lantern Light. *Kyōka is one of my favorite authors, so I was overjoyed. I had heard that Kyōka was a disciple of Koyo's."*

"Reading all day, and Kyōka's words are like jewels, every one. In the scene where Omie dances, I felt as if I, too, were enveloped in a rainbow of light and my spirit were dancing toward heaven."

"I want to experience a love like the women in Kyōka's stories. Deep and gentle and sublime. A bittersweet but chaste and beautiful love without any impurities."

The young lady who'd written the diary was nothing as exalted as an oracle, but instead seemed like an ordinary girl who enjoyed reading, who yearned for a storybook sort of romance, and who thought of her distant family.

She reminded me a little of Tohko, but that was probably because Tohko read with such passion the girl's impressions of books she'd read.

Since it came through in Tohko's voice, her image overlapped more than it might have otherwise. In my drowsing mind, the young Himekura lady had taken on Tohko's image rather than Maki's.

A willowy young girl with long black hair and white skin, tightly clutching a book she'd received from her father to her chest, so impatient to read it that she fidgeted even during meals.

The whole day, she would page through her book dreamily and give a sweet sigh at the romances and adventures written in it. She would read aloud over and over the passages she liked best, as if rolling them over her tongue, and recite them from memory, then sigh rapturously again, a starry-eyed book girl—

"I've received a volume which makes me sigh with its beauty. The volumes Father sends me are all wonderful, but this one is especially so. The cover has flowers embroidered on it in scarlet and pink and light blue and purple, in gold and silver thread, and the words are written in impeccably graceful brushstrokes on paper that feels so wonderfully smooth. What sort of person could have made this book?

"The fact that the story in it is Demon Pond *by Kyōka makes me even happier. I feel as if it was a special volume made just for me."*

"I've read Demon Pond *more than a dozen times already. It feels even sweeter and more beautiful than the times I've read it before. Out of Kyōka's stories, now I adore* Demon Pond *more than* A Song by Lantern Light, *more than* The Grass Labyrinth, *more than* A Play of Sunlight on Leaves. *The woman in the story has the same name as me.*

"I'm also called Yuri. So I wonder if perhaps the reason this volume is with me really is fate."

"I snuck out the back way with Chiro and took a stroll to the pond.

"The pond is scary at night because there's a ghoul, but during the day it's very pretty. Chiro was excited, too.

"I suddenly got the idea, why don't we name the ghoul Shirayuki? Because there's a ghoul named Shirayuki who lives in a pond in Demon Pond, *too.*

"Then maybe we wouldn't have to be so afraid of that pale creature.

"The Shirayuki in Demon Pond *obediently keeps a promise for Yuri's sake. It listens to her singing to blunt its loneliness."*

Shirayuki…a ghoul…was there really a ghoul? A humanized ghoul, like Tohko… A mysterious girl… A pond…were they sealed in it?

Enfolded in her gentle voice and the warm blanket, I gradually slipped into unconsciousness.

The pond I had yet to see floated up in my mind like a wisp and tiny lights bobbed around it like fireflies, and there was a mysterious song like a lullaby.

A snake is in the swamp there,
in the swamp there.

A bead of water 'pon her neck,
Golden shoes upon her feet,

Call me this and call me that,
call me that

Pale light streamed in through a crack in the curtains. The room was still dark, and the outlines of everything were indistinct.

That point before night was entirely over, the border between dream and reality…

So maybe what I'd seen then was a dream.

Tohko, pale faced and with her eyes bent, looking down at me.

Her eyes brimming with sadness as they gazed at me.

The ends of her hair fraying from its braids and tickling my cheek. Tohko brushing it aside with a cool, white hand.

Almost touching but not quite—that slight and gentle…

I'd caught a slight, halting murmur in my ear as I verged on sleep.

"I wonder…how much longer…can I be here?"

What had Tohko meant?

Why was she looking at me with such a sad, unguarded expression?

She left the young lady's diary on her lap, open to the last page.

A single red flower rested there.

It was a dianthus.

Immersed in its sweet fragrance, I closed my eyes again.

When I sat up, it was completely light outside the curtains.

A bird was chirping at the window.

I gasped and looked around the room.

Tohko was gone!

I couldn't find her in the bed or anywhere in the room.

As proof that she had actually been there the night before, the blanket Tohko had been bundled up in was folded up in a corner of the bed. The diary was gone.

When I touched the blanket, it was cold. Where had Tohko gone?

I recalled the sad expression and the husky voice I had witnessed at dawn in a

half-conscious state, as if through an obscuring mist. My heart thrummed and I couldn't stay still.

Had it been a dream? Waking to find Tohko gone left me unavoidably anxious and my brain started to burn.

I was frustrated by my impatience, so I got dressed and left the room.

How could she barge in and then just disappear?

But maybe she'd just gone to the bathroom. And anyway, I had no reason to attack Tohko if she'd gone back to her room in the middle of the night…Geez, why was I so worked up?

I knocked on the door to Tohko's room, but there was no reply. When I opened it, the room was empty.

That gave me a shock, and a cold sweat broke out on my skin. Just then, a cold voice spoke behind me.

"If you're looking for Miss Tohko, she's in the book room."

When I turned around, Uotani was glaring at me with large accusatory eyes.

"Miss Tohko was quite dejected. Did you do anything to her?"

"No," I answered, shaken.

So it hadn't been my imagination last night after all? Had something happened to Tohko?

"Where's the book room?"

"…This way."

Uotani narrowed her eyes in annoyance then, and with a shake of her pigtails, she turned her face brusquely away and began walking.

Uotani proceeded without a word, and I followed her in silence.

When we reached a nook on the western side of the first floor, Uotani stopped in front of a door and knocked.

"C'mon in!" Tohko's voice came back jovially from within.

Wha—?

Uotani opened the door.

That same moment there was a *creak*.

Inside the room, it smelled like dry grass, and with only one small latticework window, the air was cool. It was as if time had come to a stop.

The window was open, but there was no breeze. The walls of the 130-square-foot room were buried behind shelves, which were packed with old books. The shelves went all the way to the ceiling, and a wooden ladder leaned against them.

Tohko was sitting on a faded old chaise lounge, the skirt of her white cotton dress arrayed around her, reading a book that was spread open on her lap. Several other books were stacked up on a Queen Anne table.

She'd changed clothes and probably redone her hair. Her neat braids spilled down onto her skirt.

Her figure was so mingled with the swarm of old books that she was like a single white flower—pretty and gentle and captivating.

For a moment, I felt as if it were a stranger there, not Tohko.

Her braids shifted and she slowly lifted her head.

The instant her clear black eyes met mine, as I stood transfixed, a gentle light came into them, and her lips curved into a smile like a flower blooming.

"Good morning, Konoha."

Uotani bowed politely to Tohko, then left.

Still standing at the door, I stared at the flowerlike smile that came over Tohko's face, feeling as if I were still in that dream.

"What's wrong, Konoha? You're spacing out. Didn't you get enough sleep? But you fell asleep before me last night, and you didn't wake up even when I pinched your nose closed and tickled your neck."

"You did that?!"

"Sure. You didn't wake up at *all.* You fall asleep too easily, Konoha. If you go on a school trip like that, the people in your room are gonna doodle embarrassing stuff on you, y'know."

"Grrrrrr."

I growled, but Tohko only said with a smile, "Oh, I ate the *Tonio Kröger* that you gave me as a gift as soon as I got up this morning. Thomas Mann is *so* good. I was overtaken by a philosophical mood this morning."

From the nonchalant way she was talking, it was almost impossible to imagine how sad she had looked at dawn. So maybe I hadn't seen what I thought I had. And maybe the reason Uotani had said Tohko was dejected was just because she'd been hungry.

Of course. That was obviously it.

I began to regret my anxiety, and I shut the door violently.

"Hmm? You look like you're annoyed about something."

"It's just your imagination. Have you been awake all night?"

"Yeah."

"You seem pretty energetic, considering."

"I'm used to all-nighters. Especially before tests."

Tohko puffed her chest out with a proud smirk. How obnoxious.

"So did you read the whole diary?"

The smile faded from her small face ever so slightly.

"Yeah…I did."

Huh? Maybe she wasn't so upbeat after all.

As that thought occurred to me, Tohko stood up, a grin engulfing her face, and spread her arms wide.

"This is the book room mentioned in the young lady's diary. It's like a dream world. It's full of deliciousness! It's amazing! *Sigh.* It's too bad, though. The paper got too old, and it's past its expiration date so I can't eat it. It's so unbearable."

She gave a forlorn sigh and walked along the shelves, gazing longingly at the spines of each book.

The young Himekura lady who'd loved books—perhaps she, too, had picked up a book and flipped through its pages with this same gleam in her eye. That completely ordinary girl had been forsaken in love and drowned herself in the pond.

"These books were sent by her father in Tokyo for his little girl. For her, books

were proof of her father's love."

As she spoke, Tohko took a book down from the shelf and turned back its faded cover.

"'To my daughter…,'" she whispered, her voice wreathed in gloom, and then she turned the book toward me, holding the cover open.

On the inside of the cover, a brush had written, "To my daughter." I knew they were the words a father had written for his daughter, living in solitude at their villa in the mountains.

"All the books I've looked at have the same words inside. Probably every book in this room does."

After a look of sadness passed through her eyes, Tohko's voice became gentle.

"It's because she was forbidden to leave the estate. The books that came from her father were probably the only things she looked forward to. When a book arrived, she was probably so overjoyed that she immersed herself in the world of the story, forgetting where she was.

"The author Yuri liked best was Kyōka Izumi. That book you're holding is by Kyōka."

I turned it over and looked at the cover and saw the name Kyōka Izumi and the title *The Grass Labyrinth*.

Tohko began talking animatedly.

"Kyōka was born in 1873, and he became an author who published continually through the reigns of three emperors. While drawing from the influence of supernatural literature of Edo period authors like Akinari Ueda, he built his own fantastical writing style that wove the supernatural together with novels written using unique phrasing and alternate readings of words. Interestingly, a lot of his famous works take place in the 'flower and willow world' of Edo high culture. His fans include not only readers, but also a lot of authors. Ryunosuke Akutagawa wrote an impassioned review for Kyōka's collected works, and they say that he even had an influence on Yukio Mishima and Yasunari Kawabata.

"The tales Kyōka tells are like wine made out of flowers! The lovely wild chrysanthemum, the arcane evening primrose, the dazzling gardenia, the dignified honeysuckle, the orange osmanthus blooming gloriously.

"While you taste, sip by sip, the clear, glittering liquid, all the while growing intoxicated on the fragrance of the flowers, your steps become unsteady, you get light-headed, and you don't even know where you are anymore. You get swallowed up in the dizzying cacophony of flowers spreading across your tongue."

Tohko's cheeks were flushed, and she let out a sigh.

She looked as though she was actually drunk.

"The monk who encounters a beautiful woman living deep in the mountains and experiences something supernatural in 'The Holy Man of Mount Koya,' the heart-stoppingly beautiful prose that weaves a spell over a connection cemented through art and a moment of extremity in *A Song by Lantern Light*. The book you're holding, *The Grass Labyrinth*, is another masterpiece in which you can get your fill of Kyōka's almost dangerous, subtly profound beauty! You could even say that the

protagonist Akira Hagoshi has lines that express Kyōka's work as a whole."

Then she lowered her eyes and whispered, almost singing, "'Whether tis a dream, reality, or illusion…I feel that I may see it with my eyes and speak not of it—and that it is gentle, familiar, touched by pathos, emotional, filled with love, fluffy, and moreover, pure, cool, bloodcurdling, seeming to tear at the heart, that which seems to enchant… By way of example, the feeling of gazing upon your mother's beautiful breast from within her belly before your birth, containing pure, fragrant milk—'"

When she opened her eyes, they were limpid and blank, as if she'd returned from another world.

I was the same, feeling as if I'd traveled through a dream world of phantoms, sucked in by Tohko's words and her tone of voice. When I came back to my senses, my forehead and palms had become coated in sweat.

Tohko stretched out a white hand and took a book from the stack on the table.

This time she showed it to me without opening the cover.

"Out of everything, what this fan of Kyōka loved most was the play *Demon Pond*, which features a heroine who shares her name."

The beautiful book from the diary—

During the long years, several books had faded, but the handmade one with the embroidered flowers on the cover seemed to glimmer faintly against Tohko's chest.

Tohko described *Demon Pond* for me.

"A husband and wife named Akira and Yuri were living in Kotohiki Valley in western Japan. One summer two years before, Akira had come to Kotohiki Valley and heard the stories surrounding Demon Pond from the elderly belfry keeper.

"How long ago when a dragon god was sealed in the lake, it had promised to never again cause a flood.

"How in order to remind it of its promise, they had to ring the temple bell three times a day.

"How if they forgot to ring the bell even once, the vow would lose its power, the dragon god would be released, and everything would sink below the water.

"The old man died, and in order to protect Yuri, who lived in the village, Akira stayed in Kotohiki Valley as the new belfry keeper and became Yuri's husband. But there was an ongoing drought, and the villagers decided to make Yuri a living sacrifice. Yuri died and Akira stopped ringing the temple bell. Instantly there was a flood and the village was swallowed up."

"The diary mentioned the name Shirayuki, right? It said it was a ghoul, I thought."

Tohko replied, "Shirayuki was the daughter of the dragon god who was sealed in Demon Pond, a princess. She wanted more than anything to visit her lover who lived in another pond, but she was bound by the vow inherited from her ancestors and couldn't leave the lake.

"This angered her, and in order to break the vow, she ordered the goblins that were her minions to knock the bell down. But when she heard Yuri singing as she

waited for Akira, she held herself back. Yuri was something like an oracle."

"That's the same situation as Yuri Himekura, then. There's a ghoul, there's an oracle, and there's a man who comes from another place."

"Yes…that's probably why our Yuri identified with this story so much. And there was another major element that made *Demon Pond* a special book for Yuri. The fact that Yuri and the student who came to her estate would fall in love had been inevitable ever since *Demon Pond* was written—ever since Yuri came into possession of it."

Her voice was painfully gentle, echoing through the room where time had stopped.

Yuri Himekura was overlaid on top of Tohko.

"What do you mean?"

Her clear gaze quietly turned on me. In the distance, Baron was barking. Dust danced in the feeble light shining through the window.

"The student who came to this villa was looking for a book that was a keepsake of his mother. It was this book. One book that Kyōka wrote brought the two of them together."

Had the diary mentioned that, too?

Tohko lowered her eyelashes, then looked back at me and declared in a strained voice, "The student who came looking for this book was named Akira."

I gasped at the strange symbols that were so reminiscent of a story.

Yuri was the girl in the villa.

Akira had come to visit.

It could never happen in real life. But it was an inevitability called chance that *had* happened.

If the two of them met, they would be bound to fall in love; they were destined to meet and they had met. When they learned each other's names, how had Akira looked in Yuri's eyes and Yuri in Akira's?

Yuri at least wouldn't have been able to help falling for Akira.

A young man with the important name of Akira had appeared before Yuri, who idolized love, and who idolized the heroines of Kyōka's stories. It was as though Yuri had cherished the idea of him even before they'd met.

"There are a *lot* of couples in Kyōka's stories who fall in love at first sight. Their eyes make contact for only a moment and everything around them is different, the meaning of their life changes, and their souls get deeply bound to one another. Yuri and Akira probably fell in love the same way."

A deep gloom showed in Tohko's eyes, though she spoke matter-of-factly.

Of course, this story didn't have a happy ending. Akira had cast Yuri off, and Yuri had drowned herself in the pond.

"You know, Konoha, their story resembles *Demon Pond*, but there are parts that take after *The Grass Labyrinth*, too."

I dropped my eyes to the book in my hands.

"With this?"

"For one thing, the protagonists' names. *Demon Pond* has Akira Hagiwara, and

The Grass Labyrinth has Akira Hagoshi. Their names are slightly different, but they're both Akira.

"Akira Hagiwara comes to Kotohiki Valley while collecting stories passed down in various regions, but…Akira Hagoshi goes on a journey because he wants to hear once more the rhyme his mother used to sing for him before she died, and he stays at the cursed Akiya mansion, where a lot of supernatural things happen to him."

That definitely resembled the Akira who appeared at the villa looking for a book that was a keepsake of his mother's.

Wait—

I felt a tug and remembered something about when I'd come here.

"It's very important, so tell them exactly that without any mistakes."

The lines Takamizawa had made me say. Could that have been—?

"What's wrong, Konoha? You're making a weird face."

I revealed to Tohko what had happened when I'd come to the house and had actually tried saying the words.

"…I'm Konoha Inoue from Tokyo. I'm a second-year at Seijoh Academy…I heard there's something I'm looking for here. Is the master of the house available?"

Tohko's eyes went round.

"Those are the exact same words Akira said when he came here! They were written in the diary.

"Yuri was hiding in the shadow of a tree, listening to the exchange between Akira and the butler! And then she said, 'I'm the master,' and stepped out."

I felt as if a cold hand had taken hold of my heart.

So there had been a deeper meaning to those words after all!

Tohko was completely wound up and walked briskly around, clutching the copy of *Demon Pond*.

"Argh, I wonder what this means. I mean, making you give your pedigree and the name of your school even.

"A *student* comes from *Tokyo* to stay at the mansion where a young Himekura lady is in residence looking for *something important*—it's exactly like eighty years ago!

"And that's not all!"

She came to an abrupt stop and brought her face within inches of mine, her jaw clenched in an intense expression.

"The name of the dog."

"The dog? You mean Chiro?"

"No, not Chiro. Baron. They kept a black shepherd dog at the villa as a guard dog back then. Its name was Baron. There's an entry where Baron bites Chiro and Yuri tends to her. That's the same name as the dog they're keeping here now! Do you think that's a coincidence?"

"No."

I answered instantly. The guard dog they'd kept eighty years ago was also named

Baron—and it was a black shepherd. It couldn't be chance.

"No, Maki has intentionally crafted a situation identical to eighty years ago. She made you say the same thing Akira said and named the dog Baron, and—!"

I got goose bumps and felt the core of my brain grow hotter. I recalled the people looking out at me with blanched faces from doors and the shadows of hallways.

Of course, they would be afraid! Because the same thing as eighty years ago was happening in a mansion that was rumored to be cursed.

"But in that case, wouldn't Maki have to fall in love with me at first sight? Plus, that would mean you were Shirayuki and have to be a ghoul, you know."

I got whapped on the head instantly.

"I am not a ghoul!"

"But if the young lady and student are Maki and I, the ghoul is the only one left."

This time she flicked my forehead hard with one finger.

Tohko looked livid. Her face was bright red and she was trembling.

"This isn't a joke!!!"

Uh-oh—she was in kind of a dangerous mood.

"So then, are you saying that I, the pure and lovely book girl, will slaughter everyone and turn the mansion into a sea of blood?"

"No, I…"

I cringed and backed up. Hugging *Demon Pond* to her chest in one arm, Tohko clenched the other fist tightly and waved it around.

"As if *I* could be a ghoul! I don't eat people, I don't show up dripping with blood and holding on to a dead arm I found in a pond, and I don't relentlessly haunt or curse people for nearly eighty years! Is that how you see me, Konoha? You're saying that the maidenly black hair that symbolizes the book girl looks white to you, aren't you?"

"Whoa, whoa, I'm not the one who made you be the ghoul. That was Maki!"

She'd been batting at me, thwapping at my head, but then she froze.

"You're right, everything is that black-hearted woman's fault. Arggggggggh, I will *neeeeeeever* forgive her! I'll expose Maki's plot and get the dirt on her! And then I'm gonna clear all my debts and I'll order *her* around! This is a battle that will decide the future of the book club!"

Argh, the same old rampage had begun. I didn't even want to get involved in any more weird stuff.

As I sank into a funk, the book girl grabbed my collar and crisply said, "Top priority investigation! Come with me, Konoha!"

The middle-aged man at the souvenir shop remembered us.

"Well, now, it's the little goblin girl and the student."

He greeted us out of nowhere with a joking smile.

"The fact that there's a young lady and a student staying at the Himekura estate is making the rounds, y'know. It seems there's another girl, the friend of the young lady, and people're talking about who it might be, and there's a big hubbub to put the cherry on top and say it's the ghoul," he explained with a laugh.

Naturally Tohko got quite annoyed.

"That's so *mean*! I'm not a ghoul! I'm an ordinary high school girl, a book girl, exactly as I seem to be."

I wish you wouldn't force it, especially in a place like this, I thought. Beside her, my cheeks turned pink.

The man quickly apologized and invited us to have some tea with the sweet mugwort dumplings he was selling, wrapped up in bamboo leaves.

Tohko wouldn't know whether it was any good…but employing her imaginative powers, she gave her impressions convincingly and became friendly again.

"Ooh, yummy. It tastes like a haiku by Kobayashi Issa! The aroma of the bamboo is so airily refined, and the sweet bean filling is gentle and not too sugary."

The man presented us with several of the stories about Shirayuki that were told in the village.

"Well, I think the idea of ghouls in this day and age is laughable, too. But there are actually quite a few people who've seen Shirayuki. Have you heard the story of how she appeared from the pond where the young lady drowned herself, covered in blood and holding an arm between her teeth? There are also stories about a woman with white hair dressed in a kimono standing on the bank of the pond or of seeing a woman with white hair disappear at the estate. At night, there'll be a tapping at the windows of those involved in the construction, and when they look over, a woman whose face is hidden behind white hair is peeking in through the curtains…she whispers, '*Akira, Akira*,' bitterly…"

Tohko had grabbed my sleeve, probably out of fright.

"They say that even at the main house of the Himekuras, there was bad luck after the young lady died. There's that little shrine at the estate as you know. The young lady is apparently laid to rest beneath it, but the reason they did that instead of interring her in a graveyard was because they wanted to contain the curse, they say."

So Uotani had been praying at Yuri's grave.

"The topic of development has come up several times, starting fifty years ago, and each time Shirayuki appears and there's a big flap over it. Especially with that fire fifty years ago."

The guy shuddered.

"The flames broke out at the mansion suddenly, and the master was dangerously close to death. He happened to be in residence at exactly that time. They never learned the cause of the fire, and everyone thought it must be Shirayuki's curse."

I remembered the mansion's facade being somehow out of balance. That must have been due to repairs done on portions damaged after the fire. Fifty years before would mean the master who'd been close to death would have been Maki's grandfather or great-grandfather.

"After all, it's been nearly eighty years since that first incident, and we're not so afraid as all that of the curse. But the descendants of the people killed in the mansion; now…it must've been very tough for them."

The man frowned and lowered his voice slightly.

"The village is so small. After the incident, they were said to be connected to that

evil house, and they became the target of gossip everywhere they went. It probably caused them some unpleasant feelings. Maybe because of that there's still a gulf between them and the other residents. I wouldn't say they're ostracized, but they're in a tricky position."

But the families of those who died should have been considered victims… I felt bad for them. But maybe it was because the area was so closed off from the world that Shirayuki stayed alive.

"Could we talk to those descendants?" Tohko asked.

Then the man said something surprising.

"That's the bunch working at the mansion where you all are staying, Miss. The butler, the gardener, the housekeeper, the cook, and the maid—exactly like it was eighty years ago."

Tohko's eyes widened and she gulped. I thought my heart might stop.

It hadn't been only the young lady, the student, the ghoul, and the dog that Maki deployed! How could even the servants be the same as eighty years ago?! *And* they were the descendants of the victims?!

It was as if an icicle had been pressed to my neck. My skin prickled.

What on earth was Maki trying to do?!

Her face tense, Tohko asked, "There's a little girl named Sayo at the estate. Is she a descendant, too?"

"Yes, she is. Her grandmother Hiroko worked at the Himekura estate. She's been teased at school for being possessed by the goblin, and she basically never attends. Her mother had her at a rather late age and died when Sayo was a baby. Sayo was raised by her grandmother Hiroko after that, but then Hiroko passed away too, and she grew more withdrawn than ever. She pretty much stopped talking to anybody…"

Tohko returned hastily, "Hold on, if Sayo's grandmother worked at the mansion, *then shouldn't she have died eighty years ago?*"

Of course! Weren't all of the servants supposed to have been killed?!

"I heard there were six deaths, including the young lady's."

"Lessee, there's the young lady, the butler, the gardener, the housekeeper, the cook—" The man counted off on his fingers and then smiled. "Ah, the last one was the dog. They say there was foam coming out of his mouth."

The dog? Then the maid—

"The night of the incident, Hiroko had gone back to her family. And when she returned the next day, it was a sea of blood."

"So Sayo's grandmother was the first on the scene?"

"Yup. She was still eight or thereabouts, so it must have been a shock to her."

The shop owner shook his head, looking pained.

I pictured a hellish scene spreading before the eyes of an eight-year-old girl, and I felt another chill.

Dark red bloodstains spattered on the floor and walls.

A rancid smell. Five dead bodies slashed, shot, and stabbed.

How had the little girl felt looking at it? The impact of it could have easily destroyed her mind. Tohko was pale, too.

“But the worst was the man who tossed the young lady aside and left. If it hadn’t been for him, the young lady probably wouldn’t have died. Saying she was convalescing or that she was an oracle, that was just to keep up appearances; but actually she’d pretty much been expelled from her family, so they ought to’ve gotten married.”

“What do you mean she was expelled?” I asked, and the man looked away as if he’d said something he shouldn’t have.

“Oh, you know… I just thought there must have been a good reason she couldn’t be at home, for a young girl in that time to live in a mansion deep in the mountains, away from her family.”

While we were talking, Tohko put her index finger to her lips and sank into thought.

When we left the shop, Tohko grabbed the hem of my shirt again.

“Hey, Konoha, let’s go to the pond.”

She looked straight up at me with brooding eyes.

I remembered Uotani telling me the pond was dangerous, and a warning bell went off inside my head.

But considering I’d already come this far, there was no way I wasn’t going to go. Plus, Tohko would probably just go by herself.

I nodded and said okay in resignation.

The pond was located close to the mansion.

In the choking fragrance of dirt and greenery, we pushed ahead through the undergrowth, when suddenly the view opened up.

Hedged in by the knobby trees and overhanging ivy, the water lay deep and tranquil.

It was bigger than I’d thought, more like a lake than a pond. The far bank was a low precipice, but on this side the water’s edge was like a beach with soft grass growing on it.

I stood beside Tohko and gazed at the water’s surface.

“So this is the home of a ghoul.”

“Don’t say that.”

“So this is where Yuri drowned herself.”

“Th-that either…don’t remind me of that stuff, if you don’t mind.”

“Why not?”

Tohko’s cheeks flushed, she turned her eyes downward, and she fidgeted.

“Well, I mean…you know how they say that if you talk about the dead, they’ll come back as a ghost. Oh, of course, I don’t believe in such superstitions.”

Her eyes were swimming with the proof that she believed it completely, and she looked as if she was on the verge of crying just a little bit. Would this still turn into an investigation with her like this?

And well, I did wish Tohko would settle down, but…

Washed in the sunlight pouring down around us, the pond sparkled brilliantly.

A bird was singing cutely in the branches of a tree near us. Insects were hopping around in the grass. The air was cool and clear, and the scene was so tranquil it was impossible to believe there could be a ghoul living here.

Did Shirayuki really exist?

A woman with long white hair, drenched in blood—what was she and where did she come from? Was it true that even now she roamed the village calling Akira's name?

In her diary, Yuri had sounded afraid of Shirayuki.

"Tohko, would you tell me more from the diary? What happened to the two of them after Akira came?"

With her eyes still trained on the pond, Tohko whispered quietly, as if relating a tale from the distant past.

"Yuri tells him that the book is *very* important to her and that it has her father's message in it, so she's sorry, but she can't give it to him. Akira starts staying at the mansion as a guest so that he can persuade her."

"And then?"

"They spend a fairy-tale time together. No, it *was* a fairy tale…Like how Akira Hagiwara tells his friend in *Demon Pond*…"

With that, she recited the lines from *Demon Pond*.

"'Just by coming here, you've probably become a character in the story, too. I'm beyond that. I've become the story itself'—like that."

Melancholy and tenderness filled her eyes like light, and her warm voice spoke the words Yuri had written in the diary.

As if Yuri herself were speaking. Gently, softly, her voice slight.

"I've come to care for someone for the first time.

"No, that word doesn't express it. This has got to be love.

"I love Akira.

"Oh, I never would have believed something like this would happen to me.

"Now I'm living in the world of the stories I've only read about and dreamed of before."

"Akira has just lost his mother, and he was very empty and sad and hurt. Something bad happened at his university, too, and he could no longer believe people, and he wanted to simply cast everything aside. He revealed that to me, looking morose.

"Poor Akira.

"I wish I could hug you in my arms like your mother did."

"Akira is dearer to me than anything.

"I love his silky hair falling across his forehead.

"I love his deep voice reading Goethe and Schiller in the original.

"I love the mournful fold of his eye.

"I love his slender eyebrows.

“I love his thin lips.

“More than all of it, I love his face when it breaks into an innocent, childlike grin.

“Away! Away! Oh, how wonderful it would be if I could go with you.”

“When I’m thinking or embarrassed beyond belief, I touch my earlobes.

“‘Is that a habit of yours?’

“Akira pointed it out gently with a profound look, as if it was more adorable than he could bear; then he touched my ear, and my cheeks started burning.”

“I wish this fairy tale could go on forever.

“I will keep my promise.

“So I pray that I might be with Akira for the rest of my life.”

Yuri’s words and feelings were brought quietly back to life through Tohko’s voice.

Tohko closed her eyes and smiled.

Their love had been so innocent.

Had been so happy.

Like out of a story—what could only happen in a dream—that kind of beautiful, kind, tender love.

The breeze rustled Tohko’s long braids and the skirt of her white dress. The pure light spilling through the gaps in the trees poured over Tohko’s willowy body.

She looked as if Yuri’s soul had inhabited her body, and my heartbeat quickened. I had a strange feeling that I had become Akira and was looking at Yuri, who had taken on Tohko’s shape.

My chest hurt.

Yuri was my love.

Tohko continued to relate Yuri’s emotions.

Her expression grew sadder and sadder, her face fell, and her eyes, which she had kept shut as if in a dream, softly opened.

"I went to the pond with Akira.

"It was the first time I had ever gone out at night. I've always gone to the pond in the afternoon before. I mean, at night Shirayuki might appear.

"Akira told me, 'I'm here, so there's nothing at all to be afraid of,' and he held my hand the entire time.

"It occurred to me that Shirayuki might be secretly watching me as my face turned red on the bank of the pond in the moonlight; my heart almost stopped and I started to feel afraid, but I couldn't release his hand. In fact, I squeezed his fingers tighter, and it made him ask, 'Is something the matter?'

"I was frightened despite my joy, and after we got home, I hugged Chiro and cried."

Silence fell.

Tohko pursed her lips and gazed at her feet with a distant expression.

I recalled again the sad face I'd seen in the pale light of dawn, unable to tell whether it was dream or reality.

Tohko was making the same face now.

The old diary resting on her lap.

The red dianthus.

My breathing grew strained and my throat squeezed tight.

"…After that, Akira's friend came from Tokyo to get him. They were going to study abroad in Germany on public funds thanks to a professor's recommendation, so it says his friend told him to hurry back to Tokyo."

My body chilled slightly to hear the sad words she uttered with her head still hanging.

Akira had gone.

Yuri had chosen death, and Shirayuki had taken revenge.

After the silence had carried on a little longer, Tohko abruptly said in a detached voice, "Konoha, do you know the phrase *kyōka suigetsu*? It's written with the characters 'mirror,' 'flower,' 'water,' and 'moon.'"

"No."

Tohko silently turned her eyes to the rippling surface of the water.

"The flower in the mirror and the moon in the water both look beautiful when you first glimpse them, but they're beyond your grasp… It's saying they're fleeting illusions. The pen name Kyōka Izumi comes from his teacher Koyo Ozaki naming him after this phrase. Kyōka's stories are all fleeting and beautiful, like dreams."

I was sure Yuri's story with Akira had been the same.

Beautiful, like a flower, like the moon; a dream, vanishing with the light of morning, an illusion. *Kyōka suigetsu*.

It could be that even this very moment while Tohko and I were talking was itself a dream. Perhaps it would vanish like an illusion.

When I saw the ephemeral look on Tohko's face, that anxiety closed over me. The whisper I'd heard at dawn reawakened in my ears.

"How much longer…can I be here?"

"Tohko, did you say something this morning while I was asleep?"

Tohko looked up in surprise at my too-abrupt question.

After a look of vulnerability crossed her face, her eyes turned gentle and tinged with melancholy, and then her face split into a grin.

"That was a dream, Konoha."

A voice bright like brilliant flower petals dancing together in the light.

Her smile and her words pierced me, and I lost my voice.

Tohko bent at the waist to peek at my face from one side. Her eyes glinting mischievously, she said, "We should head back. I'm hungry. You'll write me a *super* sugary treat once we get back to the house, right?"

Then she walked off with a refreshed expression.

"That was a dream."

I wonder what that meant.

Was she tricking me? Or had it really been a dream?

Tohko's steps were light.

I turned my back on the pond, too, and followed after her.

The time I spend with her is always like a cozy dream.

In a small room by ourselves, filled with the gentle light of sunset, she reads a book.

Her long eyelashes and loose strands of hair are inked with gold.

Though she is in part ladylike, deeply thoughtful, and shy, she is also naive and intrepid.

Just when I think she has no sense of danger and she knows nothing of the world, her cheeks are suddenly tinged red and she looks down.

And then a gentle hand touches me.

Summoning these memories one by one makes my heart twist sweetly.

At the time, I had nothing but pain, and I was unable to trust people or trust to the future. It was torture to interact with others, and I stubbornly avoided conflict or telling anyone what I thought.

I turned my eyes away from reality and huddled in my empty room.

Despite that, she embraced me like a mother and offered me kind words. She would stay with me and listen to me talk.

Though some day I would have to wake from the dream, when I was with her I felt so comfortable. It was so natural that this dream would go on forever—that's what I thought.

But her fastidiousness and love brought the dream to a dignified end.

Away, away—

I've come so far alone.

Chapter 3—Shirayuki Appears

When we got back to the mansion, things were in an astonishing uproar.

"We can't have you making rash decisions, Miss. We must have the master's permission first."

"During the summer, the master of this house is me. Now then, don't be afraid. Get started."

"Miss!"

Maki and the butler were butting heads when we came running through the front door, as if Baron was hunting us. The housekeeper and gardener both had deeply troubled looks on their faces, too, and all around them stood shifting groups of people wearing work clothes and holding measuring instruments and people I didn't recognize in suits.

"Wh-what's going on?"

Tohko's eyes went wide.

"Oh, welcome back, Tohko, Konoha."

"What are they going to do?"

"You need to make preparations and get estimates when you're going to knock down a house, don't you?" Maki answered flippantly.

Tohko shouted, frantic, "What?! Wasn't the development put on hold because of the residents' opposition?"

"For building the factory, yes. But it's my decision if I want to demolish my own house, right? It's ridiculous to cower forever over this Shirayuki that we don't know actually exists. I'll smash it up and prove there's no curse."

"You can't…! What if the curse happens?"

"What's that? You don't believe in ghosts or curses, I thought?"

"Urk. That's true, but…"

Tohko trailed off, her face gray.

I felt a cool draft and turned around, and there was Uotani standing in a nook of the hallway, glaring at Maki.

Her frigid eyes clouded with frustration and loathing.

My body stiffened with a shudder.

That look was incredible.

And why her? Was she afraid of the curse? Was she critical of Maki, who was trying to commit the offense?

"Grandpa's soft. I'm doing this my way. Shirayuki doesn't exist. Neither does the curse. It's all a delusion. Even if the curse does happen, I'll take it all on myself. Relax and get to work if you please."

She made the declaration to everyone while donning a bewitching smile, as if to say there was nothing to be afraid of.

It appeared that her imperious, princess-like tone and bearing weren't quite convincing for the butler.

"But it's so violent," Tohko murmured worriedly.

She was right. Getting all these workers together out of nowhere without so much as a word of warning was too impetuous. This would just elicit the residents' animosity unnecessarily. Uotani was still glaring at Maki. Her hands trembled slightly as they gripped the corners of her apron.

Maki called to an older man wearing a suit.

"Ah, you're the antique bookseller, aren't you? You can take everything for whatever price you name. Sayo, show him to the library for me."

Uotani twitched and her face turned instantly scarlet. Her expression was a mixture of humiliation and rage. Her lips were trembling as if she wanted to say something, but just then Tohko spoke up in a panic.

"Hold on, you're selling all the books?!"

"Sure. It doesn't do anyone any good to just leave them there. Oh, could I get you to just destroy whatever isn't worth selling?"

Maki called out to the man who would handle it.

Uh-oh.

At the word *destroy*, Tohko lost it.

I thought I heard a *snap*, and it looked as though flames of rage were leaping from her body with enough ferocity to engulf heaven.

"What terrible things you're saying! There's not a single book in this world that it's okay to destroy!"

Intimidated by her voice, which seemed to reverberate though the mansion, and by the aura of her intemperate rage, the workers who had started heading to their tasks stopped moving with a jolt. The servants who had been watching it all, ashen, also looked toward Tohko.

Uotani was agape as well.

Ugh, I need to calm her down soon, I thought, wanting to put my head in my hands. Maki was the only one unaffected, and she snorted as if it was utter nonsense.

"Old books get bugs in them and start to smell bad, and you can't even read them. The same things are out in new editions so why not read those?"

She was absolutely right. Because there isn't any difference in the content.

But that idea didn't come across to the book girl who loved reading. It only poured oil on the fire.

"No! Old books contain not only the feelings of the people who wrote them, but also hold the feelings of those who've read them! I, the book girl, can never forgive dismissing that as if it didn't matter!"

For some reason, outside the door Baron was barking loudly, too—*bow-wow-wow!*

Tohko pushed her way through the workers, spread her arms across the entrance to the hall, and stood guard.

“I won’t let you destroy a single book in this house! I’ll protect them!”

And that was how Tohko blockaded herself in the book room and declared a hunger strike.

“I don’t need food or water or snacks. Until Maki repents and gives up on this idea of destroying the mansion, including the book room, I won’t eat so much as a bite of food! Even if I starve to death, my only wish is to die alongside the books!”

Starve to death? Tohko lived off something else anyway so how was not eating food any kind of issue?

But there was no way other people could have imagined the truth, so everyone was terrified by the sincerity of Tohko’s outrage and they withdrew.

Ten hours had passed since Tohko blockaded herself in. She had skipped lunch and her snack obviously, and she wasn’t going to eat dinner, either.

I wound up being forced to go back and forth between her and Maki over and over.

“Tohko, they told me dinner is ready.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Tohko says she won’t eat until you tearfully apologize and swear, ‘From now on I’ll treat every book with as much care as if it were life itself, my Queen.’”

“Did she?”

“Maki said, ‘If you bend now, you won’t have to put yourself through such an extreme diet. If you get any thinner, the chest you already lack is going to get so small it’ll just disappear.’”

“Excuse me?!”

“Tohko told me to tell you, ‘Don’t form any opinions about something you’ve never even seen. Clothes hang looser on me. I recommend reading lots of books and practicing your imagination…’”

“What a weak defense.”

“Maki said—”

“Black heart! I hate her!”

“That’s what Tohko said.”

“My, oh my.”

Thus did I come and go down hallways and stairs delivering messages, all the while my actions were growing more and more fruitless. I wondered why I was doing this.

No matter how hard Tohko tried to hole up in there, there was no way Maki would ever change her mind. Tohko was losing her temper, and Maki was toying

with her now.

"All right, what did Maki say? My retort left her unable to even growl bitterly this time, right?"

Tohko ran up to me when I returned to the library. Her legs wobbled a little, perhaps because of her hunger.

She could have just eaten the books I'd gotten for her, but exasperatingly, it looked as if she was doing a *real* hunger strike. She hadn't eaten anything but the mugwort dumplings ever since the Thomas Mann she'd had early that morning, which was probably relatively tough for a glutton like Tohko.

I started to pass on the message Maki had given me, but I was a little hesitant.

"Hmm? What is it, Konoha?"

"…I love you."

Tohko recoiled instantly and turned bright red from her neck up to her ears.

"Wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-wha…?"

"Marry me."

"K-Konoha—"

"I can make you happy."

Her eyes locked on mine, and her mouth open and shut repeatedly.

My cheeks felt as though they were on fire, too.

"That's what Maki told me to tell you."

"M-Maki?"

Tohko's face flared crimson, and the next moment she flopped limply onto the chaise lounge, as if all the strength had gone out of her. She lay there on her stomach as rubbery as a mollusk.

"Uggggh, she got me…All of that just made me hungrier."

She twitched as if she no longer had the energy to lift her head.

Sigh. Maki really did have the upper hand by far. Tohko couldn't hope to match her.

"You should eat something, Tohko. Do you want me to write you a story?"

"Urgh—no. I said I would do a hunger strike until Maki calls off the demolition."

"It's fine as long as you don't eat normal food, though. She'll never know if you just sneak bits of paper."

"That's dishonest."

She insisted stubbornly. She was so hardheaded in this way.

"Konoha…will you give Maki a message?"

"Another one?!" I shouted, fed up.

Tohko lifted her face petulantly as she lay limply on the chair. Her cheeks were puffed up like a hamster storing food, and her mouth curved into a frown as she said, "I would die before I became the bride of someone who disrespects books."

Sitting on a leather-upholstered chair, Maki snickered.

"Oh no, I've been dumped."

"Please, let this go now. My messenger services are closed for business."

"That's too bad. I was thinking of a declaration of love so intense it would make

Tohko faint."

"You were going to make me say it? You're so twisted."

Even remembering the proposal I'd just made practically caused flames to leap off my face.

"Tohko is an unthinking straight line, so she really can keep going with this hunger strike until it takes her down. Couldn't you put the work tearing down the house on hold, even if it's just for the summer? I don't care what you do after that."

"You're pretty devious, huh?"

"Coming from you, I don't think I like hearing that."

What was Maki plotting, gathering together the descendants of the victims eighty years ago, making Takamizawa bring me here, and making me say something that would invite confusion?

She wouldn't tell me even if I asked. And I was tired of involving myself in trouble.

Maki gave a sharp, knifelike smile.

"But Konoha, *when summer's over, it'll be too late*. It doesn't mean anything unless I do it now."

The window facing the balcony rattled in the wind.

The cold air being spewed from the air conditioner gave me a sudden chill.

Maki's expression returned instantly to her friendly cheerfulness, and she said without ever consulting me, "And that is why I need you to make Tohko eat somehow. You're used to handling her, aren't you? I appreciate it."

I let out a sigh and exited the room.

If I could handle Tohko, I wouldn't suffer like this every time.

On my way back to the room where the famished book girl awaited, I was considering what I could possibly do now when I ran into Uotani.

She pushed a tray loaded with rice balls, pickles, and miso soup at me with a sullen look on her face.

"What?"

"…For Miss Tohko," she muttered and turned aside with a glower.

"Th-thanks."

Surprised, I accepted the tray and thanked her.

She glanced up at me, then immediately turned her back.

"Please leave the dishes in the kitchen," she said brusquely and went away with quick steps.

…On the surface she seemed harsh, but maybe she was nice.

The way she'd left was a lot like Kotobuki.

When I opened the door, Tohko was sprawled across the chaise lounge.

"Urgh…what's that, Konoha?"

Apparently she was too hungry to see things clearly, and she stared at my hands, lower lip trembling.

"It's a late meal."

"You're going to eat by yourself?! You already had dinner. Sneak. Torturer.

Devil."

"No, this is for you."

I set the tray on a table.

"Uotani was worried about you and went out of her way to bring you this."

"Really?"

Tohko lightly touched the plate and fixed her eyes on the food.

"…It's my virtue that does it."

I nearly fell over.

Tohko was acting as though Uotani giving her food had deeply affected her.

"Then since you won't be eating anything, why not clean the plate, for Uotani's sake?"

"Urgh…okay."

With a crestfallen look, she picked up a tasteless rice ball and bit into it little by little.

"It tastes like human kindness…it's salty and sweet."

I sat down next to Tohko and started writing things down in my day planner.

"What are you writing?"

"I'm just killing time."

By the time the dishes were all empty, I had completed a frivolous story that took up two pages.

A mother comes to pick up her child in the evening.

That was all it was about.

I offered my entire day planner to Tohko, who was making a suspicious face.

"Would you read it for me? Just reading it won't count as eating, right?"

"…O-okay."

Tohko took the planner in both hands and started to read it slowly.

She was flustered at first. Then her expression gradually loosened up, and a gentle light tinged her smiling eyes.

Her eyes ran to the end, and she murmured, "That was a nice story. The choice of words was…very pretty."

"The prompts were 'dragonfly,' 'sunset,' and 'pick up,'" I told her, then took the planner from her hands and ripped the two pages out.

I ripped them up even smaller and sprinkled the pieces on Tohko's lap like flower petals.

Tohko's eyes went round.

"…Konoha."

"No one will be able to read it ever again. If you don't eat it for me, it'll go to waste."

I spoke brusquely, and she gazed intently at me, her face slightly pink.

I wished she wouldn't. Because I felt a tickle in the pit of my stomach that was driving me crazy.

"Thank you."

Tohko smiled.

She picked up a piece of paper I had shredded in her thin fingers and brought it to

her lips. Even though she usually dripped criticism everywhere, today she went on eating in contented silence, as if savoring each and every flavor.

When I saw that, the pit of my stomach got even more ticklish. I got fidgety and looked away and picked up the copy of *Demon Pond* with the embroidered cover.

"To my daughter…"

I turned the page with the brush-written message on it and sat down on the opposite end of the chaise lounge from Tohko and pretended to read.

In fact, hardly any of it penetrated my mind.

The flowing characters were beautiful to look at, but it wasn't really suited to easy reading, and I wasn't used to the old way of spelling things, so I was stumbling.

"That was great," Tohko murmured happily.

I kept pretending to read the handmade book.

Tohko leaned in and peeked at me from the side.

She smelled like violets, and I thought my heart would jump out of my chest.

"You're not making much progress."

I jumped. "It…it's hard to read. And the sentences…I don't really understand the situation."

"But *Demon Pond* is one of the easier Kyōka stories to read. *The Grass Labyrinth* tells another story inside the story, and a lot of the time you get confused about who's talking about what. That sense of peril is like turning circles in a maze and it entrances you.

"You don't think about Kyōka's stories as you read them. You surrender yourself and drown in them. Simply sinking deeply into them without flailing your arms and legs around…

"You don't think about them with your mind, you feel them with your heart.

"Still, if you don't understand it, hmm—maybe we should try reading it aloud."

Tohko's face sparkled as if she'd just had a great idea.

"Let's split up the parts and read it together! The flavor of a play goes up dramatically when you say the lines out loud!"

"What?!"

I tried to refuse, but with her belly full, Tohko had gotten her energy back, and she was in full swing.

"Since I'm a girl, I'll be Yuri, and you be Akira. You do Shirayuki, too."

"Shirayuki is a girl!"

"Don't get picky over the details. I'm doing Shirayuki's servants and her nurse. Oh, and you'll be Akira's friend and the villagers, too."

"Don't I have a lot more parts?"

"I'll help when I need to. Okay, let's start. Go!"

When I hesitated, Tohko jabbed me in the chest with her elbow.

Geez, why did I have to do stuff like this?

I started reading Akira's lines stiffly, as if I had been called on in class to read from the book.

"The water is beautiful. Whenever I look at it…beautiful."

"Yes," Tohko answered gently in the role of Yuri.

“The water is clean.”

“But it is white.”

The stage directions indicated that Yuri puts a hand to her white wig, and Tohko too touched her hair. Girls just love playing house and playing with dolls and playing pretend…

The sunny exchange between the husband and wife went on for some time.

“It is that part of you which seems to shine through the last iris to bloom, casting a shadow on the water. It is even prettier.”

“I know not whereof you speak.”

“Is there anyone who is incensed by flattery?”

“Though this holds me up for your enjoyment to ridicule.”

Ugh, this conversation was so embarrassing. Even if it was just acting.

Plus, Tohko was oddly infused with feeling…Since she was reading right next to me, I felt her breath on my ears and her braids tickled the back of my hand.

I wanted it to end quickly, but the story was still in its introductory stages. After this, Akira’s friend Gakuen would happen through a place where Yuri is by herself and talk about his friend who had gone missing.

Unwilling to let Akira go back, Yuri tries to drive Gakuen away, but at that point Akira comes back.

Akira soothes Yuri’s anxiety by telling her, “I won’t go back.” Seeing the two of them like that, even Gakuen is overwhelmed by emotion.

“How thoughtful of you to inquire whether I wish to return to Tokyo after you’ve rapped me on the back and woken me from my dream.”

“Come now, Hagiwara. This dream shouldn’t end from seeing my face. You hardly need wake if you’re having a good dream.”

“After this part, there’s a really long conversation between Akira and Gakuen.”

“Okay, I’ll be Gakuen.”

Perhaps because the entanglement between Akira and Yuri had gone away, my embarrassment gradually lessened, too, as we continued reading together.

In fact, sitting beside Tohko in this room walled in with books, following the words from a shared volume, putting our voices to them, and speaking the words, it started to feel pleasant.

And even when Tohko murmured, “Acting is fun. I could get used to this,” despite myself, I almost replied, *“You’re right…”*

“As you know…I wanted to hear the tales of every land and walked up the Northern Highway. As I did so, I…I am myself but a tale of one line.”

The words expanded my imagination.

As if the two of us were bobbing through a dream in a tiny boat shaped like a chaise lounge.

All around us was unbroken water.

The moon dyed the water silver and pleasant-smelling white flowers floated by on it.

Tohko wove the brilliant words together.

Pulling me into that unreal, ephemeral illusion.

And I answered with words.

Magic-tinged words like a moon, like a flower, tickling at my ears and inviting me into fantasy.

Finally, Shirayuki appeared and told of her frantic feelings for her beloved partner who lived in the pond at Swords Peak.

She missed him.

But while the villagers kept their promise and continued ringing the temple bell three times a day, Shirayuki remained sealed. She could not leave her pond.

Then she would knock the bell down!

"Nurse, whatever you think of me, I am going. I must go to Swords Peak. If only it weren't for the bell, there could be no pact…They will pull down the bell and smash it into atoms."

"Whatever becomes of a human life, it is no concern of mine!…Love has no need even of my own life."

As I read Shirayuki's lines, I was pulled into her passion, her restlessness, and the core of my brain grew numbingly hot.

How fierce was the dragon princess…

"I cannot abandon love for the sake of a life. Withdraw, withdraw."

"Were my body to be smashed to dust, were I to be cut to pieces, would my soul, which burns with desire and dyes the one I love in blood, turn into a faint firefly's light and fly to Swords Peak?"

The cry like lightning cutting through a storm recalled a girl who was now gone.

Hotaru Amemiya—

The strong, evanescent girl who had risked her life to accomplish her love.

Her love had been a purely destructive love that no one would have celebrated. She had loved someone she could never be with, with all of her soul.

For the rest of my life I would never forget her smile as she clung to the one she loved, smiling as she wept, and whispered, "Father…"

A painful love that engulfed everything and destroyed it like a storm.

At the same time, the image of the rampaging dragon princess was superimposed on Maki, too.

Whatever becomes of a human life, it is no concern of mine! The image of her

making that arrogant declaration—

"I'm doing this my way. Shirayuki doesn't exist. Neither does the curse. It's all a delusion. Even if the curse does happen, I'll take it all on myself."

Amemiya and Maki.

Though their appearances and personalities were polar opposites, right now the two of them felt like one, like the front and back of a coin.

Maybe it was because of the intensity they both had inside them.

Like Amemiya, Maki wouldn't mind letting a rain of fire pour over her body if it would grant the wish of her heart.

Perhaps the Shirayuki who had slaughtered the people of the mansion had been that way, too.

Sealed at the bottom of a dark pond, frustrated, perhaps she had cherished tempestuous feelings.

Like the Shirayuki of *Demon Pond*—who had caused a flood and swallowed up the village—the Shirayuki Yuri Himekura feared had dyed the mansion in blood.

The Shirayuki of *Demon Pond* had heard Yuri's lullaby as she waited for Akira, and her spirit was quieted. For Yuri's sake, she decided to keep her promise with the humans.

But…

"I envy the couple in this house; I covet what is theirs. Nurse, let us settle ourselves and emulate them."

"I will embrace this doll and sing as well…"

As I spoke the words, I felt the terrifying realization that if she hadn't heard Yuri's singing, Shirayuki probably would have caused the temple bell to fall even if it brought a curse down on herself.

Just then, there was the sound of glass shattering on the second floor.

Tohko and I jumped at the same moment.

"Wh-what was that?"

"It came from the second floor."

"You don't think it was in Maki's room?"

Tohko stood up with a grim expression and bolted out of the room.

I hurried after her.

It was nearing two o'clock in the morning. We turned on lights in the hall as we ran, then sprinted up the stairs.

As we were heading toward Maki's room, we saw a red liquid dripping, dropping in the hall, and Tohko grew even paler.

"Ee—is this…blood?"

She shook her head with a shudder, as if trying to force back her fear, and opened

the door to Maki's room.

"Maki, we're coming in!"

The next instant, Tohko gasped and came to a stop in the doorway.

Peeking in from beside her, I tensed as well.

The window facing the veranda had shattered spectacularly and fine shards of glass were scattered on the desk and floor.

Maki was holding a rumpled sheet of paper in her hand and was staring down at it.

"Maki! What happened?"

"Aw, you came." Maki looked over at us.

"We were just passing by," Tohko said spitefully, then went into the room and peered down at Maki's hand. Her voice became shrill. "Wh-wh-wh-wh-what's that?!"

Maki opened the paper for us with a dry rustle.

It was traditional rice paper that might be used for calligraphy. It was wrinkled up and the upper half was ripped diagonally.

Words were laid out on it in red brushstrokes.

"Don't forget the promise."

Something cold ran down my spine.

This was obviously a warning. But from whom? About what?

Maki pointed at a rock about the size of a fist on the table and said, "That was wrapped around this. I was thinking of heading to bed when it came flying in. It's a real pain this late at night."

"H-how can you be so flippant? If you'd gotten hit by a rock that size, you'd be in real pain then. Everything's fine because you happened to be away from the window, but you might've gotten seriously hurt if you weren't lucky. Besides, with these—these—red letters like blood—" Tohko declared, shaking. She looked over at the window and froze.

A moth had landed on the broken glass.

All around it tiny red beads had dripped, dropped.

At last they had turned into red streams, and moving as slowly as a crawling slug, they dripped down the glass.

The skin on the back of my neck prickled instantly.

A white moth.

Several streams of red, creeping sluggishly.

When they got to the shattered spot in the glass, the streams turned back into droplets and pattered to the floor in the room.

I couldn't get my voice out, as if a cold hand was squeezing my throat tight.

We were all staring at the window tensely. The warm, muggy air blowing in from outside mixed with the cold air from the air conditioner and smelled of rotting fish.

"Yuck! Wh-what's that?" Tohko murmured at last, her voice sounding as if she'd forced it out. Her thin legs were shaking.

Maki went boldly over to the window.

"Maki, be careful!"

She ignored Tohko's warning, opened the window, and went out onto the balcony.

The white moth flitted away.

"Maki, come back here!" Tohko shouted.

"It's fine."

As soon as Maki turned her face to look up, it happened.

A huge amount of red water cascaded over her head.

The red torrent engulfed Maki's entire body instantly, accompanied by the sound of water pounding against the ground.

"Maki!"

I ran to the window with Tohko. A sharp smell assaulted my nose. An intense smell like rotten cheese or fish guts that had been butchered and extracted with a kitchen knife.

I covered my nose with one hand reflexively, and we froze in place. Maki slowly lifted her face to look at us.

The pale moon floating in the sky illuminated an unearthly figure.

Her long, undulating hair was stuck all over her face and the stinking red liquid was dripping from it.

Her silk shirt and loose pants were both soaked through with the liquid, and the now-translucent cloth lewdly accentuated the curves of her breasts, her hips, and her thighs.

Plus, fish guts and scales and eyes had in fact been mixed into the liquid, and they hung from her hair and shoulders, giving off a foul stench that made me feel nauseous.

The servants, only now running in, let out a shout at the doorway and leaped back.

To them, Maki herself probably looked like a ghoul who had crawled up from the bottom of a pond, dripping with blood.

Tohko and I, our faces half covered with our hands, were also still staring at Maki without so much as a muscle twitching.

With one hand, Maki brushed away the hair stuck to her face.

When only the right half of her face was revealed, we got goose bumps even worse than before.

That was because Maki was smiling.

The corner of her mouth was hitched up, her eyes were glinting, and bathed in the moonlight, drenched with blood, letting off a rotten stench—even so, she was brimming with joy.

I was unable to discover even a hint of fear or dread or anger, nothing but an almost evil exultation, which was vividly present.

A chill ran down my spine and the hair on my body stood on end.

Were we seeing something not human—?

Silky words slipped from her smiling lips.

“It seems Shirayuki has appeared at last.”

It sounded as if she had been awaiting the arrival of a hated enemy and welcomed it.

The instant she wildly shook the other half of her hair aside, fish guts went flying and smacked into Tohko’s forehead.

Tohko didn’t scream.

She just quietly fainted.

When was it that I sensed the fraying begin?

She was extremely cautious in weaving her stories, and she hid that from me, so I was unable to see it.

But in that tiny room of books, she gave me many hints.

For example, when she would suddenly fall silent.

For example, when she would lower her eyes sadly.

For example, when she would pull away slightly, her cheeks flushed.

When she would get angry with me and tell me I mustn’t get close to her.

There was always meaning in her inexplicable behavior.

One day she grew suddenly furtive and fidgety and started avoiding me.

It was for a mere two or three days, but—

She was confined to her bed with a cold for some time after that, and when we next met, she had a bright smile and squeezed my hand like before.

So I quickly forgot about it…

Chapter 4—The Princess's Situation

The next morning I woke up when I got bonked in the head.

Tohko was the one who'd kicked me. I turned onto my side and her toes were planted on the pillow. When I tried to get up, I got swatted in the face again and again.

"No! No! It's a fish monsterrrr!"

I guess she was getting chased by a half–fish monster or something in her dream. She thrashed her legs as if she was drowning. Each time, her heel or her toenails caught me on the nose or forehead.

"Owwwww! That hurt."

After I'd taken a full five shots, I finally caught hold of Tohko's legs and managed to get up.

Dressed in a nightgown and braids, Tohko was hugging her pillow as if it were a life preserver and wore a distraught expression. The blanket I had pulled up to her shoulders at dawn had slipped back down to her waist; plus, it was wound up sideways there and the lower half of her body was completely hanging out.

I sighed.

The night before when Tohko had gotten hit in the face by fish guts, she had swooned toward me. I'd hurriedly caught her in my arms, but she'd lost consciousness.

It would have been better if she'd stayed unconscious. But it didn't last nearly long enough, and she woke up totally terrified that Shirayuki had come, and pulling the blanket over her head and sitting down at the other end of the bed, she'd said, "K-Konoha, you'd be afraid to be alone, wouldn't you? It's okay. I-I-I-I'll keep watch for you to make sure no ghouls or ghosts come in here."

I couldn't chase her away, trembling and sniffling, after something like that had happened, so I said, "I'd worry if you were keeping watch. Just go to sleep," and shut out the lights.

At my feet, Tohko had complained, "I don't think there's any need to talk that way," while lying down and snuggling into bed. She immediately started to breathe evenly, asleep. She must have been tired after her all-nighter the previous night.

I fell asleep instantly, too.

Incidentally, Tohko sleeps badly.

Whether it was because she was beset by nightmares or whether she was normally like this, she would toss around frequently, kick the blankets off, and kick me in the face or neck.

Each time, I woke up and fixed her blankets with a pinched look.

Thanks to that, I got hardly any sleep.

When I saw her asleep, I got ticked off and pinched her nose shut out of spite.

"Nnngh. Nnngh. Nnngh."

Her eyebrows came closer and closer to the middle of her forehead, and this time it wasn't just her feet swatting around, but both hands as well. She looked as if she might suffocate at any second.

I quickly pulled my hand away.

"…Geez, why can't you just wake up?"

There was the fact that a human man was more dangerous than some monster, too.

How many times did this make now? The blanket had slipped, and I pulled it back up to her shoulders, changed into my clothes, and left the room.

When I went down to the living room on the first floor, Maki was elegantly partaking of breakfast (or would it be lunch soon?).

"Good morning, Konoha. Yesterday was quite an adventure, huh?"

She said this as if it had all happened to someone else. I gaped.

A threatening letter had been thrown into her room, she'd been splattered with water that had fish guts in it, and she was fine. That took abnormal nerves.

Maki was munching on a croissant with cold pumpkin soup, ham salad, and yogurt with black tea.

In contrast, I couldn't summon an appetite and nursed my soup.

"Is Tohko still asleep?"

"…So it seems."

"So you didn't wake her up? You slept in the same room, didn't you?"

I said nothing.

"Did you get swept away by how adorable she looks when she's asleep?"

Her eyes crinkled and she shot me a meaningful look. I had no intention of being needled, so I asked a question in return.

"Have you reported what happened yesterday to the police yet?"

Maki grinned.

"Did you forget why I came here? To prove there's no such thing as a curse. If rumors got out that Shirayuki had appeared again, there wouldn't be much point, would there?"

"If the police catch the person who did it, I would think that would fix all your problems."

"So you think the one who did it is human."

"It usually is. Water with fish blood in it got dumped on you, right? So the perpetrator was on the roof then. It doesn't take a ghoul to pour water out of a bucket they brought up there."

"Hmmm. So what about the threat? It would be tough to throw that in from the roof. Does that mean there's two ghouls instead of one?"

"It's not a supernatural creature, it's a person. If you made a hole in a piece of paper that was wrapped around a rock, put a string through the hole, then hung it

from the end of a stick and threw it in from the roof using a pendulum, you wouldn't have to move. One person could do it. The paper was torn diagonally, as if it had been yanked from above by a string."

A bewitching smile resting on her face, Maki heard me out with apparent amusement.

"You picked up on a lot. And to think, Tohko was knocked flat by Shirayuki's appearance."

Actually there was one other thing bothering me. The red liquid that had been dripping in the hall on our way to Maki's room… Had the perpetrator spilled it in the middle of moving it to the roof? Which would mean they hadn't broken in from outside, but had come from within.

That thought made my spine buzz and I didn't feel good.

"In any case, the perpetrator is human. You should leave it to the police."

"No. No police," Maki answered flatly.

"Why? You know that Shirayuki is human, too, though. That's why you deliberately called the wreckers, in order to lure the person out and catch them, and you used yourself as bait. Am I wrong?"

In which case getting the cooperation of the police would be all the more important. Was there some other reason she couldn't call them in?

I didn't really understand arranging it so that the people of the mansion were exactly the way they had been eighty years ago, either. What in the world did Maki want to do?

Another smile came over her face.

"You're right. Shirayuki might be human. *But there's still a curse on this house; it didn't disappear eighty years ago.*"

I saw the corners of her mouth lift suspiciously and recalled the way she'd looked yesterday on the balcony, covered in blood and smiling. It gave me goose bumps.

Feeling how dry my throat was, I asked, "The piece of paper they threw into your room said, 'Don't forget the promise,' right? What's the promise?"

Could that be the curse?

But Maki's eyes turned suddenly frigid, and there was something wasted in her voice when she murmured, "I don't know."

The room fell utterly silent.

Just as I was beginning to feel oppressed by the cold heaviness of the air, Maki's face became friendly and she stood up.

"That was a great breakfast. I'm heading out for a bit."

"What? By yourself? Now?"

"I've got to pack the schedule in order to get the renovation work done on the house."

Maki walked off. I hurried after her.

"You should stay home today. You just got a threatening letter, and if you go walking off on your own, who knows what might happen to you? It's better not to provoke whoever it is too much."

"So you're worried about me."

Maki chuckled, and without ever turning around, she walked through the front door and headed toward the gate.

Baron ran over and barked, as if to say he wouldn't let her go out, but Maki scolded him, "Go away, Baron," and he whined feebly and shuffled away from her.

He was acting completely different from the way he treated me!

While I was feeling shocked and annoyed, Maki strode away.

"Wait! Someone should at least go with you…"

Before I'd finished speaking, Maki spun her head around to give me a sensual look.

"Then you be my bodyguard, Konoha, and protect me."

How had this happened? I never wanted to get involved in any hassles.

As I walked with Maki down the street lined with souvenir shops, I wanted to scream.

"Hey! Why is your arm around mine?! Everyone is looking."

"Oh, let's show it off. It's more fun that way."

Maki pulled her sensual lips up provocatively.

A tall beauty stood out all on her own, but since she was wearing white low-rise pants that emphasized the curves in her hips and a flashy orange tank top with a big opening cut in the back, it was even worse. With her high heels, her head was four inches higher than mine. She was like a model onstage with a spotlight pouring over her. People passing by us got wide-eyed, and one after another, they turned around.

Tohko in her cotton dress had been like a refined young lady at a summer resort and had blended in with the peaceful scenery, but Maki stood out sharply.

I wanted to go back more than anything, but Maki was in high spirits, and she had her arm locked tight around mine and wasn't going to let go.

"I'm not having any fun. Let go of me, please."

"You hold hands with Tohko all the time, though, don't you?"

"That's not holding hands; that's her dragging me somewhere!"

"If you whine, you'll attract extra attention. We talked about how the young Himekura lady and her lover, the student, parted ways. How the student was the only one shouting, *'Let go of me; let's break it off,'* and the young lady was cast aside."

When she saw that my voice was caught in my throat, Maki giggled with pleasure.

"Tohko should be waking up soon. She's going to be *angry*. She'll pout adorably and say, 'Konoha! You left me behind to go on a date with Makati!'"

"Who's on a date?!"

"Oh, but that's what I thought this was," Maki said teasingly, winding her arm through mine even tighter. Her ample breasts were practically touching my elbow. Unlike Tohko, she was doing it knowingly, so it was just gross.

She was ten times more exhausting than Tohko.

By the time we reached the office of the company that had taken on the renovation work, the humidity of summer had caught up to me and I was drained.

I sat on the sofa like an obedient little lapdog and drank the chilled barley tea they brought out for us.

Maki was discussing price quotes with a manager.

"What do you think of something like this?"

"Not bad, but I'd like to see a few others."

"That will take some time."

"That's fine."

Huh? Yesterday she'd been so energized to get started on the construction this

very second, but today she seemed pretty laid-back about it. Even though she'd said that once summer break was over, it would be too late.

Wasn't Maki's goal to develop the mountain?

Though she'd called it a meeting, the content was pretty varied—what was happening in the village, or what the area was famous for making, or exactly which noodle shop was the best, or that the head of the Himekuras preferred the noodles there, too, and had given it every possible compliment, or that the master must be relieved to have such a wonderful successor.

When the topic of succession and blah-blah-blah came up, Maki, who until then had been responding pleasantly, gave a slightly bitter smile.

It was only for the briefest of moments, but it was an expression I had almost never seen before, so it left an impression that lodged into my chest.

We went to several companies that dealt with construction, ate noodles, and by the time we headed back to the house, the sun was setting.

The path leading to the mansion was dyed a pale gold, as if it led to a fantasyland.

"Your grandfather is the school director, right?"

I had seen him at the welcoming ceremony when I'd started school there. He was a tall old man with a stately look that was complimented by traditional Japanese clothes, and he wore a rustic lens like out of a microscope over just one eye.

"That's right. Mitsukuni Himekura—he's the head of the Himekura family and has more pride in the *extensive* Himekura family tree than anything. He's an awful, stubborn, crafty, self-righteous old man."

Even if he was her own grandfather, that was going a little far with the bad-mouthing.

I sensed something dark was lurking in her easy, cheerful tone, and my heart stirred.

"Grandpa has an unquestioned role within the family, like a god. Nobody opposes him, and no one is allowed to have an opinion. My father does exactly what he tells him to, too. It bothers me, but when Grandpa glares at me, I want to start shaking, too."

The light of the setting sun cast shadows over Maki's profile.

Maybe I ought to have stayed quiet…I had no desire to intrude on other people's lives after all. Especially not Maki's family.

But the words spilled out of my mouth.

"Did you come here in order to get your grandfather's recognition?"

Her strongly sculpted, alluring face looked down at me. Her long hair flowing over her shoulders sucked in the light and looked golden. Another bitter smile had come over her lips.

"I'm just killing time. It was better than going to Nice, that's all."

Maki turned her face away.

Her gaze was turned forcefully ahead, as if it was fixed on something.

"Besides, regardless of whether Grandpa appreciates me or not, I'm still a Himekura."

Her voice was harsh.

Maki's pace quickened just a bit.

"Grandpa couldn't stomach the fact that my mother was half foreign. So apparently when my mother got pregnant with me, he declared that it wasn't my father's child and had made preparations for a DNA test as soon as I was born.

"But when the child was born, it had proof that it was a Himekura."

She lifted her wavy hair with both supple hands.

A bluish birthmark appeared, running from her exposed back to the nape of her noble neck. It was shaped like a flower or a scale.

I gasped involuntarily at how seductive it was.

"This is it."

In the light of evening, her glistening hair cascaded from her hands like a waterfall.

"People who have this dragon scale have been born to the Himekura family throughout the generations. They say the oracle who was the first Himekura had a mark on her forehead. And Grandpa has this same mark on his body, too."

When she dropped her hands, as if to shake it away, her hair hung in the air for an instant like mist before tumbling once more over her back.

Maki turned around and smiled aggressively.

"So you see, even without running any tests, they were forced to recognize me. After that, I underwent an education to make me more worthy of the Himekuras than anyone, and he even lined up my future husband, the favored son of a good family."

Her smile sought no sympathy or comfort whatsoever. In fact, it looked as if it would haughtily refuse any such thing.

Family, blood, bonds.

Maki was in a world that had no link to ours.

Irresistible ever since she was born, regardless of her will.

At school, Maki was known as a specialist in information; she had unquestioned liberties and was called the Princess, and it seemed as if nothing was beyond her power.

But maybe she wasn't living quite so freely.

Although Maki was the president of the orchestra and its conductor, she didn't ordinarily participate in club activities; instead she would paint alone in her workroom on the top floor of the music hall.

She had actually wanted to join the art club, but she had once told me, smiling even more cheerfully, that her grandfather had ordered her to join the orchestra.

That the workroom in the music hall was her price for that.

That it was the only place she could paint freely.

A lucid pang like a shard of glass stabbed into my heart, which had been clouded by anxiety.

Maki's expression became cold and stiff.

"If I had been born a hundred years earlier, I would probably have been a criminal everyone called an oracle and stuck in a mountain estate like Yuri Himekura."

I felt as if her words had frozen the air with a *crack*.

A criminal everyone called an oracle—

What did that mean?

Actually, the man at the souvenir shop had said something that bothered me, too. That saying she was an oracle or recovering from an illness was just for appearances because she'd been driven out of her home…

Had there been some circumstance that kept Yuri Himekura from being with her family?

The air was chilly, and as the sun continued sinking, it dyed everything around us blood red. Seemingly in response to this, Maki's expression became charged with the diabolic, and it looked as if she were transforming into something not human.

Her red tongue flicked over the corners of her lips.

"No, maybe I'm more like Shirayuki than I am like Yuri. I would definitely have painted the house with blood and avenged myself on those who had confined me as soon as my wretched seal was broken. My body would be trembling with the joy of freedom. Just the thought of it gives me a thrill."

A dark passion glinted on her smiling lips and in the tenor of her voice.

Her curved lips were voluptuous, and in her eyes there was coldness and cruelty and a demonic joy.

A chill coursed down my spine at the image, exactly as if Shirayuki had inhabited her body.

I collected myself and said, "Last night, I read Kyōka Izumi's *Demon Pond*. The one that was a memento of Akira's mother. The Shirayuki in that story is a ghoul, but because she misses her lover, and because she decided to stay in the pond for Yuri's sake, her rage explodes, so she has very cute and very human aspects, too. I think that if the villagers hadn't sacrificed Yuri, Shirayuki would have kept her promise and been the village's protector spirit, not a ghoul."

I had started talking passionately about the story, just like Tohko.

The diabolic cast faded from Maki's face and her look turned sad.

"…*Demon Pond*, huh? I've read it, too," she murmured as we walked slowly toward the crimson evening sun.

"I completely understand Shirayuki's restlessness since she's sealed in the pond, but I can't lose myself in a dream of love the way she did. If my body were to be broken or dismembered, my soul would never transform into a firefly's light and travel to the man I love.

"I'm not capable of love like Shirayuki, like the fireflies…like *Hotaru*."

I was surprised to hear Maki speak Amemiya's name.

Ah, so Maki saw a shadow of Amemiya in Shirayuki's violent love, just as I did.

But it was only natural.

It had only been a month since we'd watched her pass, after all.

Her funeral had been at a church in the rain.

Neither Tohko nor I had cried, but as we listened to the sound of the rain hitting our umbrellas, we'd shared a pang that continued to ache. I learned then that there is such a thing as sadness that doesn't let you cry.

Maki hadn't cried, either.

At least, not in front of us.

But I'd imagined that Maki, who'd been more deeply involved with Amemiya than we had been, had probably been much sadder than us.

Though she would probably never say so.

As if talking to herself, Maki spoke in spurts.

"I heard that the pond where Yuri drowned herself… In the summer, there are a lot of fireflies there, so I went to see one night.

"Because I wanted to see real fireflies…not artificial ones.

"But no matter how long I waited, not a single firefly appeared.

"I found out later that the fireflies come to this pond around June and July.

"By August…their life spans are up and they pass away…

"I waited five whole hours by the pond… I was pretty disappointed."

A firefly's life span is brief.

They flash briefly, then fade away like a flower, like the moon. Like the worlds of Kyōka…

Maki turned her back to me and walked a little ahead, and the image of *Demon Pond*'s Shirayuki overlaid itself on her.

The goblin princess, captive in her watery prison, thirsting for freedom so badly that she could scream; but her spirit had been soothed by Yuri's ephemeral singing, and she had watched over the woman's love.

"I envy the couple in this house; I covet what is theirs."

How had Maki felt, watching over Amemiya as she died for love?

Had she felt envious of Amemiya, who loved unwaveringly—something she was incapable of doing?

Had Maki, too, found comfort in Amemiya's existence as Shirayuki had in Yuri?

The air grew cooler and cooler.

Maki muttered irritably, "At any rate, I can't live only for love like Hotaru did, and I can't just brush it off like Ryuto Sakurai, either. I can only be myself."

As if shaking off an injury, she came to a stop and turned around.

The burning sunset illuminated her harsh, brooding expression.

"Let me ask you something, Konoha. Shirayuki was bound by a promise, but don't you think promises are made to be broken?"

I couldn't answer.

I was sucked into Maki's look, her voice, which were exactly those of Shirayuki. My spine was tingling and I had goose bumps.

Maki smiled faintly and started walking again.

I followed beside her.

My heart wouldn't stop fluttering.

What was a promise? If Maki was Shirayuki, was the thing that bound her her Himekura blood? In which case, what was Maki's goal?

Could it be that, like the Shirayuki in *Demon Pond*, Maki was trying to topple the

temple bell?

Was she trying to crush the flowers, break apart the moon, and summon a frenzy of rage?

Cold terror crept once more up my spine.

If so, this was dangerous.

Because there no longer existed a Hotaru/Yuri to contain her behavior.

When she talks about her family, she always has a warm, indulgent look on her face.

Her eyes grow distant, as if her mind is going back to the days of contentment that she's lost, and they're a little sad…

She loves and respects her illustrious father with all her heart, and she's proud of their connection. She prays at all times to be a daughter worthy of such a remarkable man.

She cared for her kind and generous mother, as well, like a little girl. *"I take after my mother,"* she told me happily, her face shining.

She cared for her father and her mother, couldn't help caring for them, and truly wished she could see them, wanted them to speak to her in their kind voices, wanted them to hold her, wanted to be spoiled, more than she could bear.

But her wish would not come true…

And so she was, in fact, always sad.

"Augh!"

The instant I opened the front door, I reeled back.

Her cheeks puffed out ridiculously in a pout, squatting on the ground with her knees up and her back pressed up against the wall, Tohko was flipping through the pages of an old book.

Maki's eyes widened as well.

"Why are you reading in a place like this?!"

No wonder the butler hadn't come out to meet us despite Maki, the master of the house, returning. It was because Tohko was planted here in the doorway like a sentinel.

Only Tohko's face moved to glare intently up at us through her lashes, sulkily.

"I can read wherever I want to."

Then she turned pointedly back to her book.

"But won't your butt start to hurt there?"

"You don't need to worry about my butt, thank you, Konoha."

"But it must be cold sitting on the floor like that."

"As luck would have it, it's all warmed up and toasty now."

Maki burst out laughing.

Tohko whipped her head up.

"Wh-what's so funny?!"

"Oh, wow, it's so soothing to see you reacting so meekly. I'm glad I took Konoha out. It really cheered me up."

"I don't understand a word you're saying, Maki!"

Tohko stood up, her face bright red.

"Besides which, Konoha is *my* underclassman, so I'd appreciate it if the president of the orchestra didn't take him around with her wherever she pleases."

Maki grinned slyly.

"Oh no, are you jealous?"

"No! As his president, I have a responsibility to protect Konoha so bad people don't reel him in and lead him into immoral conduct. Konoha's mother even asked me to keep him out of trouble!"

My mother asked her to…? That was just something people said to their kids' friends!

And "lead him into immoral conduct"? What decade did she think this was that I was an at-risk youth?

Hearing the contentious voices, the people in the mansion began to gather and listen in. This was more embarrassment than I could stand. And being glared at by Uotani's cold eyes made me uncomfortable.

"You were sound asleep, so I didn't tell you. Besides, just going to town for a little bit isn't immoral conduct."

Tohko pulled her mouth into a frown and looked at me unhappily.

Maki took the opening.

"That's right, Konoha. We had *SUCH* fun. We should go on another date."

She even gave me a saucy wink to provoke Tohko.

Tohko stamped her foot.

"Oh, I *see*! I'm so glad you had fun! I got the chance to read at the front door with some quiet, too, and it was so, *so, SO* pleasant and cool and *SO MUCH FUN*!"

Exactly how long had she been in the doorway?

After Tohko had lashed out like a little kid, she whirled around, turning her back on us, and stomped off.

Beside me, Maki was holding her sides and laughing.

As I passed by her, Uotani launched a shot at me—"You're foul"—and I snuck back to my room.

While I worried over whether something in my fortune said I would have trouble with women, I wrote an improv story on a piece of lined paper and took it with me to Tohko's room.

I knocked on the door and called, "Tohko, it's me."

There was no answer. Nearly an hour had gone by since it all happened, but I guess she was still mad.

"I'm coming in."

When I turned the handle and opened the door, I saw her long braids and small back.

It looked like she was sitting on an antique chair with her knees pulled up to her chest, reading. The book resting on her knees had an old and yellowed binding. She'd probably taken it from the shelves.

As proof that she'd heard my voice, the instant I stepped in, her shoulders twitched slightly.

But she continued her stubborn silence.

"That's from the library, right?"

When I spoke over her shoulder, she twitched again.

I caaaaarefully looked at her bent profile and saw that she wasn't pouting.

In place of the expression of rage, her eyebrows hung down slightly, her mouth was pressed into a frown, and she wore a dejected, embarrassed, troubled look.

She probably regretted losing her temper and ranting in front of everyone. She might have wanted to make up but couldn't come up with a good opening to say so.

Sometimes Maika would hug her knees with this same look.

Geez…and Tohko was way older than Maika, too.

Compared to Maki or Kotobuki, Tohko was easy to understand.

And, I thought, because of that I was able to be with her even though she'd jerked me around like crazy and caused me all kinds of problems up till now.

Because she was someone who could easily say, "I'm sorry" or "Thank you."

I peeked down at the page from behind her and read it out loud.

"…I carry one secret in my heart, you see. Rumors have it that anesthesia makes one speak deliriously, and so I fear the consequences."

"Eek!"

Tohko jumped and turned around. When our eyes met, she turned visibly redder.

"Old writing really is tough to read. What book is that?"

Her face still red, Tohko answered, fidgeting, "'The Surgery Room,' by Kyōka. It's a short story that was published in 1895—the twenty-eighth year of the Meiji emperor's reign—and it got good reviews and introduced Kyōka to the world."

Leaving my hands on the back of the chair, I moved beside Tohko and listened. She still seemed a little embarrassed, but her voice told the story without hesitation. The air that enfolded us changed to a gentle golden color.

"The doctor, Takamine, is put in the position of performing surgery on a beautiful countess. But she refuses to use anesthesia and asks him to simply cut into her. She tells him that she has a secret and since she's so consumed by it, if she becomes disoriented with anesthesia, she's sure that she'll talk about it. Takamine listens to her request and presses his scalpel into the countess's chest…"

Tohko suddenly lowered her eyelashes and bowed her head.

Her face reminded me of the sad look I'd seen at dawn and my heart skipped.

"What happens to her?"

"…She grabs onto Takamine's arm, lays her hand on the scalpel, and slits her own chest open. Appealing to him, 'You will not know me.'

"That instant, Takamine says, 'I'll never forget you.'"

Tohko's lips trembled slightly.

Her fingers tightened on the book and the tips of her nails turned white.

A sharp impact ran through me, as if I, too, had been stabbed in the chest with a scalpel.

"You will not know me."

"A contented, innocent smile came over the countess's face and she breathed her last.

"In fact, nine years earlier the two had encountered each other only once—without ever exchanging a word for only the briefest of moments. And in that one moment, they were drawn to each other… They fell in love and kept their feelings secret in their hearts.

"Though probably neither one of them ever considered that the other knew of them…

"They were both unable to forget that time like a momentary dream.

"It's like a well-chilled pear wine… The words and the story are crystalline and ephemeral…

"The faint fragrance of flowers stays in my mouth a long time, and it's so melancholy that I end up reading the same part over and over."

Tohko's eyes were still lowered dejectedly.

The feeling of the story had probably transferred to her more than usual.

But it could just be that the book belonged to someone else and was past its expiration date, so she felt bad that she couldn't eat it.

I dangled the improv story I'd just written in front of her.

"How about some dinner? Unfortunately it doesn't taste like pears, though."

Tohko's eyes went wide.

With the Kyōka book still resting on her knees, she touched the edges of the paper with both hands, then turned her face to me and smiled like a flower blooming.

"Thank you, Konoha. I will! And I'm sorry I got angry before."

My heart grew warm as if a flower had bloomed there, too.

With the words *thank you*, I had become happy, and with the words *I'm sorry*, I had forgiven her unavoidably.

It had always been that way.

While Tohko was telling me, "I haven't had anything to eat since I binged on the leftovers of *Tonio Kröger* for lunch, so I'm starving," she happily ripped the lined paper up and started eating it *crnch-crnch, flp-flp*.

"Oooh, it tastes like lettuce and salmon fried rice! Everyone works together to make a movie for the culture fair. What were your prompts?"

"'Culture fair,' 'film,' and 'applause.'"

"Oh, it's got such *youth*; it's so *vir*tuous. Ohhh, the lettuce has such nice texture; it's so juicy and de*li*cious. The fried rice is crispy, too, and was cooked really well. And even though the salmon is salty, it has some sweetness, and the salmon roe

sprinkled on top pops on your tongue, *pop! pop!*"

Tohko kept eating all the way to the second page euphorically, saying how delicious it was, but when she got to the third page, her face grew progressively tenser.

"Um…why does a hand suddenly come out of the screen? And a bunch of them at that, all wriggling around. Urgggh, it had a refreshing taste like soy sauce before, but now it suddenly tastes as if the rice was cooked in pepper. Ack, the lettuce turned into watermeloooooon! The salmon turned into fried octopuuuuus! The salmon roe turned into cherry jaaaaam! It's all stickyyyyy! The audience shook hands with the hands that came out of the screen and got all their life sucked ooooooout."

She finished eating the last bite with a snuffle, and resting her face on the back of the chair, she fell limp.

Well, you could call it fair payback. My neck still hurt from Tohko kicking it that morning. But since I'd done it after she'd thanked me so joyously, my chest hurt just a little bit.

"You're awful—awful!—Konoha! It tasted so good at the beginning. Going out with Maki really did make you turn bad!" Tohko declared outright, glowering at me tearfully.

"I've only been writing stories without problems in them lately, so isn't it nice to get some stimulation? Plus, this has nothing to do with Maki. She just forced me to be her bodyguard today."

"Oh! What an awful girl."

"How can *you* say that?"

I was frustrated because it was the same thing she always did, but Tohko leaned over the back of the chair and brought her pouting face close to mine.

"What did you talk about with Maki? Where did you go? What did you do? What did she do to you? I won't get angry, so tell your honored president without holding anything back!"

"Your eyes already look pretty terrifying."

"…Well, you can't have a girlfriend that I haven't met and approved of! I'm going to be thorough and hold a first interview, a second interview, a third interview, and a final interview! Maki doesn't pass the document check. If you date a girl like that, she'll suck the life out of you and you'll turn into a doddering old man before you know it," she declared, rattling the chair.

"If you do interviews like that, I'll quit letting you be my president!"

I just wished she would calm down. I fought back a headache and talked about the afternoon's events.

About the office, about Maki's grandfather, about her birthmark, about Shirayuki.

About how sad she'd seemed when I mentioned Amemiya.

When I'd finished telling her everything, Tohko pulled her face into a frown and complained.

"Urgh…she's definitely planning something, that blackguard. Arggggh…I mean, she never tells you the most important things and she uses people and it

drives me *crazy*."

She stood up and started grumbling as she paced around.

"If I have a request, don't use a loan as grounds to chain me into something or flash meaningful puzzles at me! I wish I could just ask her nicely to help me out. But all she does is hide things, and she never lets on about the important stuff, so all I can do is look for it on my own.

"Otherwise, I don't know what Maki is hoping I'll be able to imagine. This is so inefficient!"

Tohko…you always avoid Maki and bad-mouth her, but really you worry about her.

"That's what you meant about digging up dirt, huh?"

"N-no! I just want to innocently get some dirt on Maki and for her to feel her lifelong indebtedness and call me queen. Even while you left me behind to go out with a girl like Maki, I was advancing the investigation. I wasn't just waiting at the door for you to come back, okay? I swear," she declared fervently.

"How did you do that?"

"I made a phone call."

"Where?"

"You'll find out soon."

Tohko chortled and puffed out her chest.

"At any rate, our original goal of reaming Maki out hasn't changed. You're going to be cutting your heart pretty deeply on that front, Konoha. You can't go soft on her."

"What are you talking about, 'our' goal? I never made any goal like that!"

"We should shower and come back to this. We'll have another strategy meeting after we're refreshed."

She got off the chair with a lighthearted look and walked toward the door.

Ugh, am I going to be forced to stay with her tonight, too? The fact that she had been shaking over Shirayuki's appearance last night seemed to be beyond forgotten.

"Right. In the suspense movies, they always get murdered when they go to take a shower," I muttered, and Tohko leaped into the air.

"Ack! Th-that's just a superstition!"

She was instantly blubbering and left the room trembling.

I knew that she would be worried beyond belief of what was behind her while she was showering. I wanted her to get scared good.

I imagined how it would be and was feeling a little gratified when a scream came from the hallway.

It was Tohko's voice!

Had she run into a ghost right away?!

I opened the door and rushed down the hall.

"Tohko!"

I ran as I called her name.

I heard the sounds of other doors banging open and several footsteps approaching.

“Uggggh, wh-what is this?”

I heard Tohko’s voice again.

She was around that corner!

The instant I got there, my feet slipped out from under me—“Ack!”

“Konoha!”

A concussion hit my hips abruptly. I’d fallen unceremoniously to my butt. I felt a cool liquid on the palms of my hands. There was a big puddle in the hallway, and it was making a stain on the carpet.

What was it doing in a place like this? Was there a leak in the roof?

“Konoha, are you okay?!”

Crawling along the floor, Tohko peered into my face worriedly.

At that point, the people who staffed the mansion came in. The butler and the housekeeper and the gardener and the cook, plus the maid Uotani—all of them in a line.

They saw the stain spreading on the floor and apparently thought it was blood because a big commotion started.

“Eee! Th-there’s blood—”

“It’s the ghoul’s curse!”

A hint of madness colored the air and seized hold of normal thought. Tohko stood up and calmed everyone down.

“No, it’s not. This isn’t blood, it’s just water!”

I touched the liquid again, too. It was soaking into the carpet so it was hard to tell what color it was, but it was definitely not blood. It didn’t feel sticky.

Tohko was right. This was water…*wait, what?*

Looking closer, I saw something like grass was scattered around. When I realized what it was, all the heat was sucked out of my body in one pulse.

“Hey, are these rushes?”

The old gardener picked up a thin, limp weed with his fingertips and held it at the end of his nose to look hard at it, and then his expression turned horrified.

“It is!”

“You don’t think they’re from the pond, do you?!”

“Shirayuki really has been here!”

Tense shouts rose up all over. Uotani put her hands over her mouth, staring in horror at the rushes scattered like the corpses of insects over the dark stain.

Just then, the lights went out.

Darkness fell over us and several screams pierced my ears. People ran into each other, their voices mixed together, and my heart began to shudder with fear. Even when someone plugged in a lamp, it wouldn’t turn on, and the chaos intensified.

“Hey! Do you hear something?” someone shouted. Everyone gasped and there was utter silence for a moment.

In the taut, cool air, our ears pricked fearfully, and there came the sound of water flowing from a faucet.

“It’s in the kitchen,” the housekeeper murmured in a choked-off voice.

Who had turned the water on? Maki? No, she should have been on the second

floor…Had someone else snuck into the house?

I recalled that eighty years ago there had been a mass murder over the course of one night, and a shudder ran up my spine.

And then we heard the sound of running water from another direction, as well.

"It's the first-floor washroom!"

The cook's voice was shaking. The bath on the first floor was next. And then the second-floor washroom, the second-floor bath…We heard the sound of raging water all over, as if there was a cascade besieging us.

Every faucet in the house was open probably. It was suffocating, just like being shut inside a cage of water. What would I do if I had an attack right now?

"W-we have to stop the water anyway. The water bill will be outrageous," Tohko said pragmatically, pressed close up against my back. I didn't mind, but I wished she would quit trying to nudge me forward. Was she telling me to go investigate?

A cold hand brushed along my ribs all of a sudden, and I was struck with terror. When I looked to the side, Uotani was gripping the hem of my shirt in one hand.

She was probably scared. She was shaking.

We all formed into a clump and held our breath as we headed toward the second-floor washroom. It felt as if something was lurking in the darkness, and we moved forward step-by-step, terrified.

Someone shouted, "Augh!"

"H-hey! Don't make any weird noises!"

"Th-th-th-there's another puddle."

On the pitch-black floor, water shone slickly. This hadn't overflowed from a faucet; there was a trail of water, as if someone soaking wet had passed through here.

Tohko whispered over my shoulder breathily.

“Let’s see where the water goes.”

Uotani, still holding my shirt, jumped.

Someone voiced the opinion that it might be dangerous, but Tohko said that it would be fine since we were all together, and we moved in the direction of the water trail.

If someone slipped now, all of us would fall down. That’s how closely packed we were. We walked on, stuck together, picking out our next step.

The air was filled with a clinging humidity, and a cold sweat broke out on my forehead.

Everyone had fallen silent along the way, so the sound of the water gushing out of the faucet felt even louder.

I wondered what Maki was doing. The atrocity she'd told us about before came to mind.

"…Not a single person…was left alive."

"…There was one body that had been split open the entire length of their face with a sickle."

"…One that was impaled through the chest with a spade."

"…One who'd been shot in the head with a gun."

"…One who'd fallen down the stairs and broken their neck, and one who was lying there with foam coming out of its mouth."

The puddles led toward the book room in the western part of the first floor.

The door was partially open.

We held our breath and drew nearer and were instantly assaulted by an intense stench.

"Urk!"

"That stinks!"

Everyone covered their noses. On an impulse, I threw the door open.

Uotani gave a little cry—*Ah!*—as if to stop me.

The instant the door was fully open, the smell of blood turned rancid hit us like a wall.

Then there was a *spsh-spsh* of something flopping—

Behind me, I felt Tohko swallow a shriek. Still clinging to my shirt, Uotani stiffened.

Fear was mounting in the core of my brain and my entire body was cold.

This was a total nightmare—

On the floor, a huge number of fish lay scattered about.

There were some fish that were still alive, but most didn't move, their wet scales letting off an unsettling glow in the darkness.

But this was supposed to be Yuri and Akira's holy sanctuary—

Darkness and confusion and fear had replaced the peaceful, gentle backdrop where the lovers had grown closer in their shared feelings. It spread like a bottomless bog before us, letting off a stench that sliced through our gray matter.

Beyond the door was an absolute hell!

Suddenly a light struck us from behind.

Every one of us probably felt as though our lives had been cut in half.

But it was Maki standing there, holding a pocket flashlight. In the face of our tension, she nonchalantly stated, “This is such a circus. I figured bodies would be everywhere like eighty years ago. Looks like everyone’s okay.”

Actually, her face seemed to suggest it was a shame that there *hadn’t* been any deaths. She slipped past us in our openmouthed shock and went into the room, then pointed her flashlight at the floor. When she did, we could make out the fishes’ mouths and fins flapping. We could even see that their clouded eyes were rolling in their sockets to look at us, and everyone hurriedly looked away.

But Maki walked around calmly, pointing her flashlight and staring around piercingly, seemingly unfazed by the fish scattered on the floor, the chaise lounge, and table or by the stench they were giving off.

Just as I felt a chill go down my spine since Maki acting like that was the scariest thing of all, the housekeeper shrieked.

On the other side of the chaise lounge, a translucent human figure bobbed up mistily.

The fear of planting your eyes on something alien seized us all.

The woman, clothed in a white kimono, stood with her back to us. Pure-white hair fell to her waist.

When Maki turned her flashlight on the figure, it spun around.

A chill stabbed through my heart.

Glittering golden eyes.

Fangs protruding from a sliced mouth.

It was exactly like—

“Ah…ah…”

Her eyes still wide open, Uotani shook her head from side to side. She was making a sound at the back of her throat that wouldn’t form into words.

Shirayuki’s face was covered in a Prajna ghost mask.

With a *clank!* the flashlight went out. It became pitch-dark again and there was a scream.

People crouching in the hall holding their heads, people fleeing, people raving steadily. Tohko was clinging to me, too.

Uotani stood frozen, trembling.

I thought I heard someone murmur, “Ah…the promise…it’s…,” and then I saw the white figure move with the speed of a bird across the floor and ceiling.

The glass in the window shattered, the curtains billowed in the wind, and the light of the moon shone in.

“K-Konoha…that was…that was…!”

Tohko’s voice quavered at my ear, and she pointed at the window.

Beyond the latticework fitted into the window, thin, bony hands reached toward us.

While one hand rattled the latticework, the other was moving, as if trying to catch hold of something.

Outside the latticework, the Prajna mask peered in. Sunken, gaping, golden eyes —

A string of unnatural things were happening, and it was too much—my senses might have been numbed. Without shouting or looking away, I stared at that bizarre spectacle.

Kicking aside the fish in soggy clumps, Maki ran toward the window.

Astoundingly, she grabbed the arm that was reaching through the lattice and tried to yank it in, but Shirayuki's arm slipped through Maki's hand and disappeared into the darkness.

Glaring at the broken window, Maki tsked.

The sound of water had stopped at some point, and the bone-chilling silence filled the room.

Still clinging to me, Tohko lifted her face timidly. Uotani's eyes were still wide with terror and she was stiff. Maki was the one she was looking at.

Illuminated by the eerie moonlight shining through the window, Maki whispered significantly, "Konoha, if you toss me aside and leave like eighty years ago…next time Shirayuki might appear and turn this house into a sea of blood."

I'm sure that Shirayuki exists.

How can I communicate the chill I felt when I laid eyes on her, bound by an old vow, shut away, and twisted?

As if the dark shadows lurking in that cursed mansion gathered together and condensed and transformed into the shape of a frightening girl—

In rare cases, such things certainly happen.

Beings that are human but have moments of being inhuman. Bizarre creatures that carry a brutal, primordial soul, somehow enigmatic, which our ordinary awareness cannot fathom.

It is quite simply unrealistic—but undeniably reality—and it left me helplessly astounded, and I could only tremble.

Shirayuki's laughter rang out loudly, filled with joy, that day.

At the time, the reason behind it was an impenetrable mystery to me.

But now that I am long separated from that summer and people and time have all passed on, I am able to exercise my imagination on that laugh.

Yes, that could only have been—

Chapter 5—The Guest Who Was Too Early/The Lover Who Disappeared

After all that, the bunch of us cleaned together that night.

Luckily the lights had only gone out because a breaker had tripped, and they were easily turned back on, but even when the room was brighter, it wasn't as if that made the fish scattered all over the carpet disappear.

We all picked the fish up, removed the rugs, and intently scrubbed the exposed floor with a mop and rags.

"Miss, you and your friends should retire now," the butler suggested, deeply grateful, but I was in no mood to sleep and joined Tohko in her work.

Maki was picking up fish and throwing them into a bucket with a blasé expression as she'd been doing the whole time.

Tohko had her braids pinned up on top of her head and the lower half of her face covered in a bandanna. With the rubber gloves she wore, she was in full war dress for sanitation. She tried to pick a fish up by its tail, but it looked as if it wasn't working, and after trying several times, she gave up and focused all her efforts on polishing the floor with a rag. Occasionally she would shake her head rapidly from side to side, as if to clear away some bad thought.

The others were working silently, too, looking exhausted and hardly once opening their mouths.

Uotani also wore a tense, brooding look and didn't say a word.

It was nearly midnight by the time the room became somehow tolerable. The smell of fish had seeped into my hands and clothes, and I waited my turn to get into the bath, then slathered my entire body with bubbles and scrubbed my skin until it practically split open.

Thus, after two o'clock, I finally managed to lie down in my bed.

Tohko climbed into my bed again, hugging a pillow. I had no energy to chase her off and reminded her before falling asleep, "Please don't kick me."

It was after noon when I woke up.

I had developed two beautiful lumps on my head.

"Tohkoooo."

"I-I'm sorry!"

Tohko said she was going to wash her face and ran off.

Geez… Frowning, I got dressed and left the room.

As I walked down the hall, I thought about the supernatural events the night

before and grew depressed.

Up until now I had been theorizing that Shirayuki was human. One person was fully capable of sending a threatening letter and of pouring water off the roof. But what had happened last night—

I recalled the demonic woman with the white hair who had floated before the bookcase and a shudder went down my neck. Was it possible that everyone could see the same hallucination?

And those fish and the puddles in the halls—that was impossible for one person to do. How had they managed to get into the house and do those things without being discovered by anyone?

The more I thought about it, the colder I felt.

Even though she had been exposed to such danger so far, Maki was still unfazed. And she didn't act as if she was trying to catch the ones responsible for it, either. Was she…waiting for something? But what?

When I started to go downstairs, Uotani came up.

"Morning."

I called to her, but she didn't answer.

She wasn't ignoring me; it was as though she couldn't hear me. Her eyes were bloodshot and she looked as though she could barely breathe. Her face had gone beyond ashen to pure white, like a candle. Her steps were unsteady, too.

While I was caught up in my surprise at how haggard she looked, Tohko, who had finished getting dressed, ran up.

"Morning, Sayo. Wha…?"

It seemed Tohko sensed that Uotani's manner was odd, too.

"Sayo, can you come over here?"

She took Uotani's hand and pulled her down to the bottom of the stairs, then pressed their foreheads together.

"I knew it! You've got a fever! And your eyes are all red. You couldn't sleep last night, could you? You should stay in your room and rest today."

Uotani finally seemed to have noticed the presence of others. She looked up at Tohko with a trembling gaze and shook her head from side to side, as if frightened of something.

"I can't…sleep. I can hear…the song."

"Song? What song?"

Uotani's voice grew even hoarser. Her face contorted, and her eyes filled with tears before she whispered with difficulty, "My grandmother…taught me…the rhyme…that comes from…the land…of dragons…"

"'The land of…dragons?'"

Tohko knit her brows and looked thoughtful.

My mind was also moving through what the land of dragons could possibly be.

"You know what, let's go back to your room, Sayo. I'll go talk to the butler for you."

Tohko and I delivered Uotani to her room, her head still bent and trembling.

It was a bare room on the first floor about six feet on a side. I saw that a woven

ball the crimson of a spider lily had been set on top of her chest of drawers, and a shiver went through me.

That old woven ball…I'd seen it before…

Could the rhyme be the song Uotani had been singing that day?

Once we'd pulled her bedding out of the closet and spread it out and put her to bed, we left the room.

Just as we closed the door and were about to walk off, there was a whisper of a song behind us.

A snake is in the swamp there.
Rich old spirit's little girl
Get you up and set a trap
A bead of water 'pon her neck,
Golden shoes upon her feet,
Call me this and call me that
To the mountain or the field, go, go, go…

Tohko and I looked at each other.

When we returned to her room after that with warm milk and honey and some fever medicine, Uotani was sitting up in bed cradling the ball in her arms like a baby and tonelessly singing the same song.

A snake is in the swamp there,
in the swamp there.

Her monotonous voice and her vacant eyes, as if she was lost in a dreamworld, made my skin prickle.

The events of last night could have given her such a shock that it threatened her mental balance.

Even if she looked undaunted, she had only just started middle school, so it was only to be expected, but…

Tohko made her drink the milk and the medicine, then told Uotani a story to take her mind off everything, during which Uotani finally fell asleep.

We made sure she was asleep, then quietly left the room.

"That song is in Kyōka's *The Grass Labyrinth,*" Tohko said once we'd gone a little way from the room.

"That's the story where Akira Hagoshi is the main character, right? The one where he stays at a haunted mansion to find his mother's lullaby. So then, do you think Uotani's grandmother read it in *The Grass Labyrinth* and taught the song to Uotani? But what's 'the land of dragons'? Is there a dragon god in that story like there is in *Demon Pond*?"

"No…although…"

Tohko's eyebrows pulled a little closer together, as if something were bothering her, and she put an index finger to her lips. And just like that, she fell silent.

That night in my bed, Tohko read Yuri's diary to the end for me.

The bookmark, made from a pressed, red dianthus, was stuck between the pages of the diary.

I leaned against the headboard with my legs stretched out in front of me and listened.

"Akira might leave. He's had a troubled look ever since his friend came. His friend has said that studying abroad is something Akira wants with all his heart. I know it's true. Because Akira told me so."

"It's hard for me to see Akira lost in thought, and when I tried to go for a walk with Chiro, Baron barked at us with terrifying ferocity. Chiro got angry and tried to go toward Baron, so I quickly stopped her."

"Shirayuki came to the house! When I looked out the window, she was standing there with cold eyes! 'Everything will be well if you let me handle it, who cares about breaking a promise, if you did you'd be free,' she said, to tempt me. But I could never break my promise. I'm the oracle who prays for the prosperity of the Himekuras, and I'm my father's daughter. I don't resemble my father or anyone in the family…There are some people who say awful things about that fact. But my father calls me, 'My daughter.' And my current mother, father's second wife, also used to speak kindly to me when I was still there. I could never disappoint them."

"Akira intends to study abroad after all. I eavesdropped on him talking with his friend, and the world came crashing down around me. It felt as if my chest would tear open. The fairy tale is ending; it's ending, it's ending."

"A volume came from Father. I have nothing but that to cling to now. I thought if I could see Father's message, it might soothe me, so I went to the butler's room and tore the wrapping off the freshly arrived package and opened the book. I had been told before that I mustn't do such unseemly things, but I thought I would go crazy if I didn't.

"But when I opened the cover, I knew that this was not a book like the others I'd received from my father up until now.

"My father's books will no longer offer me comfort. The words To my daughter *will never again echo through my heart. There is only despair like falling into a pit of darkness."*

"The butler brought the book from my father. It's sitting on my desk. I turned back the cover and stared at my father's message. Tears filled my eyes and refused to stop.

"So it was true when everyone said that I was not my father's child, but a child of sin, born as the result of my late mother's infidelity.

“There is no happiness left to me. If I was to meet Shirayuki now, I would surrender to her temptations. I must not go to the lake at night. I considered it, but then there was a tap-tap-tap *at the window, and when I turned around, Shirayuki was there, smiling. ‘Back, back,’ I beseeched her over and over.”*

Tohko huddled on the bed and continued reading dispassionately.

Bent over the book, her profile looked calm, but her eyes were a little watery.

It was said that Yuri wasn’t a true child of the Himekuras.

When I thought about it now, the souvenir shop owner and Maki had both said things suggestive of that. That there were circumstances that kept Yuri from being with her family. Was that because Yuri was a product of her late mother’s affair?

Yuri’s sadness pressed in on my chest.

At the same time, mentions of Shirayuki in the diary increased as well. Shirayuki, who she had only encountered at the pond before, began appearing at the house and would tap on the window the entire night.

Yuri’s spirit was haunted more and more and grew heavy with madness.

“Please, Shirayuki, don’t come here. No, you’re wrong. I’m still keeping my promise. You’re wrong, you’re wrong. It’s not like that. I’m not a ghoul like you. I mustn’t go to the pond. My promise. Our promise.”

“Shirayuki beckons to me from the window. I won’t go to the pond. I think I’ll put up some red flowers. White flowers are so ugly—I hate them. I think I’ll tear apart every one of the white flowers, every one of them, and throw them away. I can’t go to the pond at night. After all, the moonlight is white; I mean, it’s white after all, white; I mean, it’s white, it’s white. White, white. Pure white. Ugly. Terrifying. After all, it’s white. My father’s books. Baron is barking. Whenever I try to go out, Baron barks. Baron bit Chiro and she got covered in blood. I bandaged her and I was crying. I thought Chiro was going to die because she’d lost so much blood. I can’t see Chiro. Akira is setting out next week.”

A parade of incomprehensible words.

Maybe Yuri had gone crazy.

Around this point, my mind surrendered to sleep and grew muddled. Yuri and Shirayuki and Maki wearing an old-style kimono and Tohko and Uotani and the pond at night and a red ball and swirling fireflies mixed together in a jumble in my head, and I started losing control.

Yuri, hugging a doll and singing a lullaby, anxious that Akira Hagiwara might go away, was Uotani. Shirayuki ordering the temple bell to be toppled was Maki. Yuri slashing open her own chest with a sickle was Tohko.

Why did you give me a dream?

Even every dream must be woken from?

In the end, love is a flower reflected in a mirror. The moon floating on the water.

I know Akira will come back.

No, Akira is gone.

A torrent of vividly colored consciousness. My body sank heavily into it, as if it were being sucked in.

And that moment—

Yuri's words, rushing into my ears, became suddenly calm.

"Something wonderful happened. I won't ever grieve again. I'm the happiest person in the world."

Calm, yet somehow desolate and sad—

That was the tone in which Tohko read the next part of the diary.

"I made a promise with Akira.

"An important promise.

"I nodded, 'all right.'

"When I asked if I could grow lemon trees and myrtle, he laughed at me. Akira's dear laugh that I'll never forget for the rest of my life.

"After that, I retreated to my room and painted a picture with watercolors.

"A solid wall of books. Right in the middle of it, there's me, smiling happily, radiant, more contented than anyone.

"I made a promise to myself, too.

"This one is different from the others. It's a promise that will never be broken.

"Since I was able to meet Akira, I know that I'll be smiling for the rest of my life."

"That's the end…," Tohko's whisper trailed off.

When I barely lifted my eyelids, there was the same sad face I'd seen that dawn and the red dianthus blossom fluttered down from the diary's last page.

With her head bowed so sadly, my chest tightened and I felt uneasy.

Argh, I wish all of this were a dream and that when I wake up, I'll be in my own bed and my mother will be coming to tell me that breakfast is ready.

Her promise was pure and beautiful, strong and energetic, and also demandingly cruel.

With an expression that showed she was pushing her sadness into hiding, she looked unswervingly at me and quietly whispered, “Maybe I’m wrong.”

“Even I can’t explain it very well.

“But I have to do it.

“It’s because I’m my father’s daughter.”

The mysterious blood that had continued pumping from the distant days of old and which flowed inside her—the bond linking and entangling people with each other, that was the beginning of everything, and it brought her and me together and bound us tightly and now it has pulled us far apart.

But it was fun. I was happy; I’m glad I was able to meet her.

I don’t regret for a second that we were able to be this close.

I told her that with a look that was almost heart-wrenchingly gentle, and no matter how I called to her among the soft white petals, in the end she never looked back.

I thought of her again and again, to the point that I was unconsciously mimicking her habits, and retraced our story from our meeting to our parting.

I wonder how Undine is doing.

Afterward, I too left the little room of books where we had spent our time together.

It wasn’t my mother’s voice that woke me from my slumber; it was a motorcycle engine and Baron’s barking.

Early morning. The sky was still pale at this hour, and Tohko was breathing evenly in her sleep beside me with her back turned toward me.

The night before she had read Yuri’s diary to me at my pillow. I had a hazy memory of Tohko murmuring, “That’s the end.” But apparently that’s when I’d fallen asleep.

Outside, Baron was barking noisily. I got out of bed and pulled back the curtain over the window that looked out over the garden.

A jolt went through me instantly.

A big motorcycle was parked outside the gate.

Beside it, a couple was mashed together in each other’s arms, kissing.

Baron was pushing his nose through the bars and berating them—*bow-bow-bow*—but they didn’t budge; their faces bent, they exchanged passionate, hungry kisses.

The woman had swathed her remarkable figure, which was more than competition for Maki’s, in a biker suit. Her dyed blond hair cascaded to her shoulders, and even at a distance I could tell she was pretty.

The man was in jeans and a jacket, tall and broad shouldered, and he, too, was a pretty good-looking guy—hold on, I knew him.

That was Ryuto! The son of the family Tohko was boarding with who was younger than me. Ryuto was a first-year in high school, even though he looked as if

he was in college.

What was Ryuto doing here first thing in the morning, having a make-out session in front of the gates to Maki's vacation house?!

"…Mm, Konoha, you're awake?"

There was a limp voice behind me, and I jumped into the air.

Tohko sat up, her bangs bent in odd directions from her sleep, and rubbed her eyes groggily.

"G'morning, Konoha."

"G-good morning."

Uh-oh. I couldn't let Tohko see the scene in progress outside the window.

"Why are you closing the curtains?"

"The sun's too bright. It's hurting my eyes."

"It doesn't look like the sun's that far up to me."

Tohko climbed out of bed. I stole a glance through the gap in the curtains and saw the love scene was still going on. *You take forever, Ryuto! Can't you wrap it up?*

"Hey, hey, you can't come over here, Tohko."

"Hmph. Why not?"

Now I'd made her suspicious, and she drew steadily nearer, her face set.

"Are you hiding something out there? Why is Baron barking so much?"

"I-it's Shirayuki! Shirayuki is pressed up against the window."

"What?!"

Tohko paled instantly and drew back.

Ha! She won't be ripping the curtains open now!

"O-oh no. What're we going to do, Konoha? But I have to confirm it with my own eyes."

Her face took on a certain determination, and she reached out her hands and threw the curtains open to either side.

I'd relaxed completely and let my guard slip, so there was nothing I could do to stop her.

"Ack!"

The curtains were wide open and the spectacle outside was exposed.

Ryuto was still right in the middle of his make-out session. A kiss on the lips moved from the cheek to the ear, then went back to the cheek, then turned toward the neck.

Tohko plastered herself against the window and trembled.

Then she threw the window open and leaned out of it to scream.

"Ryuto!! What're you doing?!"

"I just don't *get* you! Why can't you arrive like a normal person?!"

When Tohko had finished changing and rebraided her hair, she came and pounded on Ryuto with a silver tray.

"But Tohko, you badgered me to do this super-urgent investigation and get my butt out here. But it's not like I got a license, and the trains don't run out here, either.

And it looked pretty pointless to try hitchhikin' in the middle of the boonies. The only option I had left was to ask a favor of someone I know who has a ride."

"Y-you have a point—but you didn't have to smooch all over her, did you?! You can't do things like that in public. I've told you that millions of times since kindergarten. Why haven't you gotten any better?!"

Actually, you're the marvel to keep saying that millions of times since kindergarten, Tohko.

The woman who'd been kissing Ryuto got on her bike and went home. As she was leaving, she casually pressed her lips to Ryuto's with a "See ya," enraging Tohko even further.

"But you can't just be like, 'Okay, bye,' when someone gives you a ride. Nobody even thinks twice about somethin' like that in other countries."

"This is Japan and you're Japanese!"

She smuuuuuuuuushed a tray into Ryuto's face.

"T-Tohko…! Yer smashin' my nose! I can't breathe. Save me, Konoha…"

I believed he'd only brought this on himself, but I limply grabbed Tohko's arm from behind her.

"Let's leave it at that. He did come all this way for you."

"Mrr…"

Tohko looked from me to Ryuto's twitching form, pursed her lips a little, then lowered the tray.

"Whoo! That was rough. I owe ya, Konoha."

"The next time I catch you doing lewd things, even Konoha's pleas won't save you."

Tohko glared at Ryuto and sat in her chair. The breakfast the housekeeper had brought us a few moments ago was arranged on a round table. There was a cold ratatouille of boiled summer vegetables like eggplant and tomatoes and paprika seasoned with olive oil, plus freshly baked baguettes, herbed cheeses, and runny omelets. Hot tea in a pot. Cool Perrier in glass bottles.

Ryuto and I sat down, too, and served ourselves breakfast.

Tohko opened Fouqué's *Undine*, tore in from the edge, and took a bite.

"Friedrich Fouqué was a German author born in 1777. He came from an old line of nobility, and his grandfather had even been a Prussian general. Fouqué changed careers, leaving behind the military life to become an author, and in 1811, his most famous work, *Undine*, came out.

"Undine the water spirit falls in love with the knight, Huldebrand, and becomes his wife, but Huldebrand breaks a prohibition and speaks badly of Undine on the water, and so unable to stay in the world of humans, she returns to the world of water.

"Having lost Undine, Huldebrand tries to marry another woman.

"But that was an unforgivable act in the world of water. Undine was bound by their laws to deliver death upon Huldebrand with her own hand.

"It's rustic and fondly familiar and a little bitter…a little tender…like biting into hard rye bread that's full of raisins. The more you chew, the more the sourness of the

rye develops and melds with the natural sweetness of the raisins, leaving a poignant echo on your tongue…"

She munched on the shreds of the page with a slight rustling noise, and as she swallowed, Tohko let out a sigh.

"That's awesome. I'm *crazy* for things where the girl tries to kill the guy she fell for and make him hers," Ryuto said as he efficiently cleaned his own plate and then pulled Tohko's omelet over without a thought. Tohko frowned and glared at Ryuto.

"This is *not* a story about that kind of dirty vortex of emotion. It's the tale of the melancholy love of the water spirit who is bound by an inescapable law.

"On his wedding night with his new wife, Undine appears wearing a white veil and Huldebrand tells her, 'I want to die with my lips on yours.' The scene where Undine gives him a kiss and lets loose her tears is so poignant and beautiful, your heart just swells. It's totally different from your casual smooching."

"Yeah, yeah."

Looking blasé, Ryuto loaded some omelet onto a buttered baguette and bit into it.

As I listened to their uninhibited conversation, it struck me again that these two had known each other since childhood and lived in the same house. So Ryuto had been the one Tohko meant when she said she'd made a phone call. And Ryuto had also investigated the things Tohko had asked of him and hurried here. Would most people go that far for a childhood acquaintance who was like a sister to them?

Deep in my heart, I felt something hazy.

When we finished eating, Ryuto told us the results of his investigation.

After the mass murder at the Himekura estate, Akira Shikishima had gone to Germany to study abroad as planned. A Japanese student studying abroad around the same time had written about Akira in his letters home, and through his connections, Ryuto had been allowed to see them.

"At first, Akira threw up and stuff a bunch from stress, and he took awhile to recuperate apparently. It sounds like he had a lot of trouble 'cos he couldn't communicate.

"So there was that, and then the way he talked and carried himself was real classy and polite, and he was serious, but he wasn't good at interactin' with people. He didn't drink alcohol and went back to his boardinghouse before the sun set. The guy really whined in his letters, like 'Oh, it's such a shame 'cos I wanna get to know the other Japanese students,' or 'Oh, I think he hates me in particular,' or 'Oh, Akira Shikishima is like the moon floatin' high in the sky overhead.'"

Akira would often sit by himself, zoned out, and at those times he would always tug on his earlobe with a sad look in his eyes. The love he'd left behind in Japan had had the habit of touching her earlobes originally. Apparently he would talk about how she was gone now with a dark look on his face.

Yuri's habit of touching her earlobes—

Maybe Akira thought back about what had happened in Japan while touching his soft ears.

He'd known about Yuri drowning herself. How had he felt about his love ending her life because of him…?

It coincided with my life and sent a jolt down my spine.

That was a torment more terrible than death!

Apparently Akira never once went home while he was studying abroad. It was almost certainly because of Yuri. He probably would have felt as if his heart were being ripped apart. Even after his period of study abroad passed, he stayed over there, and after a while, he disappeared.

Germany entered a dark period, and even after the student who'd written the letters returned to Japan, he worried about Akira. Then a letter reached him from a local friend there that told him about seeing Akira on the street holding the hand of a small child. Since the child looked like Akira, the friend supposed that he had married and started a family.

What had Akira's life been like after that?

Tohko put her index finger to her lips and listened intently.

Ryuto also told us about the fire that had occurred at the estate fifty years ago.

"I heard the police were investigatin' it as an arson, but in the end they never caught the person responsible and there was somethin' really *off* about the whole thing. The source of the fire wasn't a storage shed or a side building, it was right smack in the middle of the main house. And even though it was the middle of the night, they got word about it fast. The fact that the master of the house happened to be stayin' there by himself secretly was the weirdest thing of all. And he definitely didn't get his eye hurt from the fire. When he was carried into the hospital, some people said there was blood pourin' down his face…"

Ryuto drained his now-tepid cup of tea in one gulp and returned the cup to its saucer.

"There's definitely somethin' more to the fire fifty years ago. The Himekuras're involved, so the local cops probably couldn't interfere much. I mean, the possibility that there was direct pressure from the Himekuras is huge."

"The master fifty years ago would be Maki's grandfather, right?"

"Yup. The current head of the family, Mitsukuni Himekura. He had just taken over when it happened, still a young buck. Surprisingly, he was sickly when he was a kid, and he would go and recuperate in the countryside. After the thing with Shirayuki, people in the main branch of the family were droppin' left and right and the boy who was supposed to take over died, so Maki's grandpa was pulled out in a hurry. He was a sheltered rich kid, so at first everyone around him underestimated him, I guess. His true colors came out fast, though, and he crushed all of his enemies. He made the Himekura family, which had been headin' for oblivion after the thing with Shirayuki, even richer than before. He's still the reignin' head of the family. He's a monster."

"Grandpa has an unquestioned role within the family, like a god. Nobody opposes him, and no one is allowed to have an opinion."

Maki had said the same thing about her grandfather.

Mitsukuni Himekura was involved in the fire fifty years ago. What did it mean?

Tohko asked, “When the fire happened, who was the first one to start putting it out?”

Ryuto grinned as if he’d been waiting for that question.

“A woman *who just happened to be walking by*. Her name was Hiroko Uotani.”

Tohko gasped and leaned forward.

I gasped, too.

Did he say Hiroko?! Uotani’s grandmother was Hiroko, too! She’d been a maid at the estate eighty years ago—

The smile still on his face, Ryuto told us, “Yeah, the only person who survived the incident eighty years ago.”

The air grew suddenly heavier.

With a perplexed expression, Tohko whispered, “Hiroko was the first person to discover the mass murder, and thirty years later she was the first to discover the fire that had broken out at the same house.”

A tiny shudder ran through my spine and cold sweat trailed down my back. It was too perfect to be chance.

“Hiroko alerted the fire department and then ran into the fire herself and even managed to rescue the master. Mitsukuni Himekura owes her his life. Last year, when Hiroko died, they say he came to see her in secret before her funeral.”

The old, phantasmal story that had happened eighty years ago had a sudden feeling of immediacy, as if it had drawn closer to our reality.

Tohko wore a tense expression.

Ryuto laughed offhandedly.

“That’s all I can tell ya for now. If anythin’ else develops, I’ll hear through my cell. And now, my throat’s all dried out so could I bug you for a refill on my tea, Tohko?”

The mood eased at his carefree cheerfulness, and Tohko’s face, too, curved into a smile.

“Okay. As thanks for all the hard work you’ve done, I’ll bring you something sweet with your tea, too.”

“Cool. You can take your time, don’t worry.”

Tohko left the room and her footsteps grew gradually quieter.

Suddenly Ryuto leaned in toward me.

“Konoha! You and Tohko were in the same room this morning, weren’cha? You were both in pj’s, and Tohko was all mussed up from bein’ asleep. What was that? Were you together all last night? You made any progress?”

I leaned away from him. Had he asked Tohko for tea just so he could ask me this? The skin around my ears burned with embarrassment.

“Tohko said she was afraid of ghosts and forced her way into my room, that’s all. I swear, it’s nothing.”

“Whaaat? You serious?”

Ryuto’s face turned openly disappointed and his voice rose in criticism.

“Argh. I woulda been way cooler with it if you and Tohko had just done it. I thought maybe that’s what you were gonna tell me, but that’s just sad. What’re you

doin'?"

"Why are you attacking me when nothing happened?"

"Gah. You coulda been a little bolder since Tohko's upset an' all."

I warily asked, "Tohko's upset?"

Ryuto looked at me with incredibly sexy, mysterious eyes.

"Course she's upset. Despite the way she acts, she's a sensitive high school girl. She gets upset about everything, from little stuff to big stuff. Can't you figure it out, Konoha?"

The sad look I'd seen at dawn came abruptly into my mind and my chest ached, as if it was being squeezed tightly.

Seeing me rendered speechless, Ryuto smiled even more meaningfully.

"I mean, when she's like that, if you could just write her supersweet stories, I'd appreciate it. Ever since her summer cram courses ended, she's been at home whining that she wants to eat your snacks."

Was that true?

The world was full of sweet stories Tohko would love without me having to write them.

"Oh yeah! I'll teach you the words that cheer Tohko up when she's depressed."

I hesitated, but he brought his lips close to my ear and whispered three words as if they were a magic spell.

"Hey! I can't write something with those prompts. That's so embarrassing. Does that really cheer Tohko up?"

"It's more effective than an energy drink. The ingredients work. So I guess the rest is up to the skill of the cook," he said smugly, and then his eyes turned suddenly sedate. "You'll be fine, Konoha. You're Tohko's author."

A dark shadow fell over my heart. He'd told me that I was Tohko's author again.

But I had zero desire to be that. It wasn't anything about Tohko, it was just the author part that I never, ever wanted to…

My fingers became as cold as ice and my mood slumped further and further. Just as I felt as if I was sinking into a swamp of memories, the door opened.

But it wasn't Tohko standing there, it was Maki. And she didn't look happy.

"So it *was* you," she said in a hard voice, turning a sharp, prickly look on Ryuto.

"I'd heard a moron trying to look like a big man was all over some blonde like a rutting dog in front of my house at the crack of dawn and that he wanted to stay here, and it looks like my foreboding was right."

I was surprised by her sudden harsh words.

I had picked up on the fact that Maki didn't think fondly of Ryuto from the distaste in her voice and the way she looked when she spoke his name. She hadn't cared for Ryuto ever since Amemiya was still alive and dating him.

Maki had venomously told me after the fact that because Ryuto had involved me in Amemiya's problems at the time, it had thrown off her plans.

So I knew that Maki wouldn't celebrate Ryuto's arrival. But she wouldn't normally have bared her emotions to quite this extent.

Leaving aside the way she made nasty comments with a smile, of course…

"You shouldn't keep looking at people like they're cockroaches, Princess."

Ryuto's face tightened, as well.

Maki hated Ryuto, and he bore her a grudge in return.

Well, there was no avoiding that since she had held him captive at a hospital and made him disappear from the world. Plus, after everything that happened, he probably hadn't gotten any apology from Maki whatsoever.

Ryuto kicked back his chair and stood up, then walked toward Maki. I gulped reflexively and clenched my hands into sweating fists.

The two of them glared at each other as if they were the worst of enemies. When he was right in front of Maki, Ryuto lifted only his lips into a smile, as if to show her how relaxed he felt.

"Well, I'll be relyin' on your hospitality for a couple days. So thanks."

"No way. Get out of here now."

"I don't have anywhere to stay."

"That's not my problem."

Their wrestling gazes were getting more and more heated, and the air was crackling with tension.

"Maki! Ryuto investigated what happened eighty years ago for us! Besides, Tohko is the one who told him to come."

"So what?"

Even dropping Tohko's name didn't change Maki's attitude. If anything, her eyes grew even harder.

"It ticks me off seeing the smirking face of that sloppy womanizer. Hey, if you put a plastic bag over your head and promise you won't speak another word for the rest of your life, then I don't mind if you stay."

"You some kinda monster or what?"

"Did I manage to get it through your skull that not every woman in this world is sweet on you? You need to thank me."

"Oh, I see. Should I pay you tuition, too?"

"No need. Just get out of here. The mere fact that you exist infuriates me. It's only been a month since Hotaru died and you're making out with another woman, and on top of everything, you do it in front of me. You've got guts."

The heat disappeared from Ryuto's face and his expression grew cool.

"But Hotaru is dead."

There was an incredibly loud noise and Ryuto's knees buckled.

Maki had slapped him. Her eyebrows went up, her eyes flared with rage, and she screamed, "I wish you'd bled to death! I shouldn't have been so nice and taken you to the hospital!"

Ryuto yelled back at her, "Except you held me prisoner when you did that and tormented me by deliberately droppin' apples and melons and whatever in my cut!"

"That's because you wouldn't listen! I should have stabbed you with a paring knife and wriggled it around in your side! Then your heart wouldn't be straying so easily, I bet!"

“It doesn’t change anything! Because Hotaru is dead! She’s gone now! Doesn’t matter if it’s one day or one month or ten years! Even if I waited a hundred years, I still wouldn’t get to touch Hotaru again or hold her in my arms or kiss her!”

Now what? Ryuto was getting pretty emotional, too. In a screaming voice that sounded as if it had been ripped out of his chest, he shouted, “I can’t go on thinkin’ about someone’s ghost when they’re buried in their grave, like Kurosaki did! Only warm, living girls have any hold over me. I have no idea what you’re so ticked off about, but don’t tear me apart over it!”

Maki’s cheeks flushed scarlet.

The next moment, she’d raised a leg and landed a brutal kick in Ryuto’s side.

I gasped.

It was the spot where Amemiya had stabbed him.

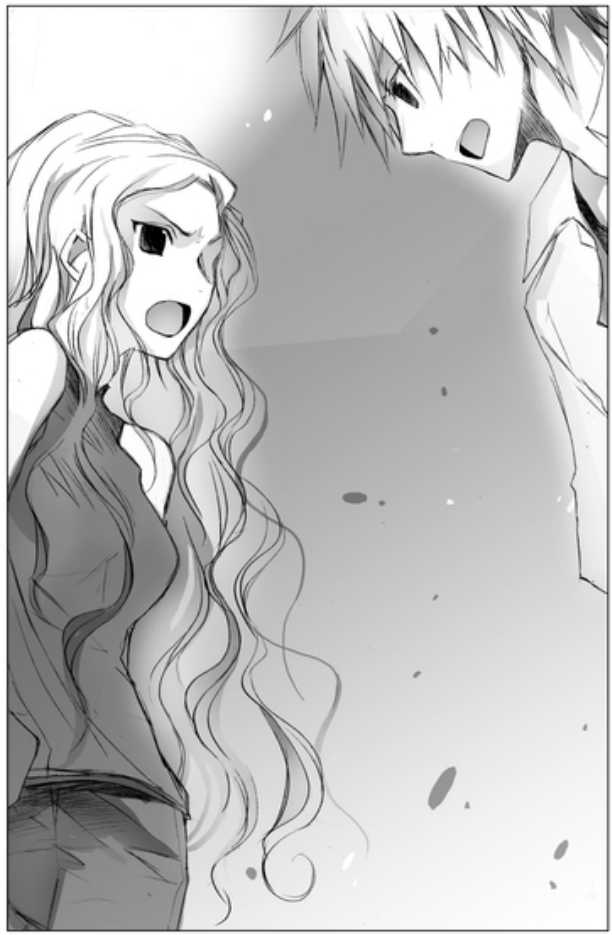
Ryuto’s eyes bugged out and he fell to his knees on the floor.

“You are such an obnoxious little snot,” she spat. She swept aside the hair that had fallen across her face in aggravation, then turned her back on him and walked away.

“Ryuto! Are you okay?!”

I ran over to him, frantic.

“—Nngh. Don’cha have any restraint, you bully?”



Ryuto wailed, still doubled over and holding his side. He looked so sad with his slumped shoulders, and for once he actually looked depressed.

I comforted him hesitantly. “Maybe whenever Maki sees you she remembers Amemiya…and it hurts her…and so maybe that was the only way she could manage to talk to you.”

“…Prolly.”

Ryuto didn’t lift his head. I caught a glimpse of him biting down on his lip. His hoarse voice was tinged with pain and desolation.

"If Hotaru were still alive…I mighta loved only her.

"The first time I saw Hotaru, I had this feelin' that this one would truss me right up…If she'd lived, it woulda happened."

"I got this feelin' like I finally met the ideal woman or like she would be someone important to me."

"I always thought if I could meet a girl like that, she'd be all I ever needed."

I vividly recalled him cheerfully talking her up in the restaurant, as if it had happened yesterday.

And how after that, on the day of the funeral, his entire body had been racked with his tears as he tore up Amemiya's letter.

"If we'd had more time, I woulda taken her to all kinds of places. I woulda made her eat a ton and fattened her up. If only she'd love me."

Ryuto had screamed those words in a shaking voice as the streaming rain poured over him and his tears rolled down his face.

"But Hotaru is gone…so all I can do is search forever. For a woman who'll love me so much she wants to kill me and hold onto me tight."

His desolation made my heart ache.

I had been nothing more than a reader of the story of the girl called Hotaru Amemiya.

But Ryuto—he had probably been just as sad as Maki to lose Amemiya. There was probably some pain or despair or sense of loss that only those two, who had been so deeply involved with Amemiya, understood. And maybe because of that, the two clashed with each other.

I heard light steps climbing the stairs and caught the sweet aroma of butter.

Tohko had returned.

Ryuto stood back up. In the same instant, Tohko's cheerful face entered.

"Sorry I took so long."

"Sorry, Tohko, but I gotta go."

"What? Why, all of a sudden?"

Tohko blinked her eyes, holding a tray with a pot of tea and some cupcakes sprinkled with sugar.

With an amiable look, Ryuto grabbed two cupcakes and bit into one of them.

"Mm, that's good."

"C'mon, Ryuto, what's going on?"

"I came all the way here, I figured I oughta sightsee. I'll still be around and I'll come check up on ya."

"Where are you staying?"

"I'm plannin' on stayin' with a nice lady I'm gonna meet later."

He left, waving the hand that held his cupcake.

"Geez, he doesn't regret any of it!"

Tohko pouted and banged the tray down on the table.

I said, “I’ll walk him out,” and chased after Ryuto.

I called out to Ryuto in front of the gate and he turned around suspiciously. Baron had started barking at him, but Ryuto was distracting him with a cupcake.

“Huh? Konoha? What’s up?”

“Why not wait in town till things cool down, then come back? I’ll convince Maki to let you stay.”

“Oh, I’ll be fine. I’m good at findin’ places to stay and it’s summer so I could just sleep outside anyway.”

“I want you to stay, though. If Shirayuki appears again, I won’t be able to handle it by myself. And I have no idea what Tohko might go and do.”

Ryuto’s face broke into a childlike grin. His lips curved up happily, and he looked me up and down.

“Oh—you’re worryin’ about Tohko?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“It’ll be okay. Tohko’s great to have during a crisis. I mean, she’s got a lot countin’ against her, but you should follow her lead on stuff like that.”

“Ryuto, c’mon.”

“Ahhh, I wish I could meet my one and only, too. I wanna see what it’s like to love one woman so much it drives me crazy.”

He murmured brightly, then patted Baron on the head with a “See ya” and left.

I watched his reliable-looking, muscular back grow more and more distant, feeling uneasy.

Baron nudged at my butt as if to say, *“hurry back,”* and when I started walking, I saw Maki standing in front of the door, her arms crossed and a hard look on her face.

“…He left, right?”

“It’s not like Ryuto’s forgotten Amemiya. If she were still alive, he said she might have been the only one he ever loved.”

The desolation Ryuto had shown earlier came into Maki’s eyes.

“…That doesn’t change anything,” she muttered brusquely, then turned her back. She looked powerful and majestic from behind, and I thought she resembled Ryuto in that way, too.

I sighed and went inside.

Tohko was waiting in the room. I had to get back.

As I was starting up the stairs, I heard voices talking.

It sounded as if things were getting heated.

Was it in that room in the corner? As I walked in the direction of the voices, I heard snatches of the conversation.

“What are we gonna do? There’s even *a boy who came to get him* now. It’s just like eighty years ago.”

“So if that student kid leaves, we’re all going to be killed?”

“But we’ve kept the promise!”

I felt a chill on the back of my neck and goose bumps on my skin.

Were these the voices of the butler and other servants?

Had they put Ryuto in the role of the friend who came after Akira and were now worrying that I was going to leave?

But what did they mean about a promise? *Who* had they made a promise with?

My breathing grew strained and my pulse quickened.

Keeping my footsteps quiet, I moved away from the door and had just started climbing the stairs, still holding my breath, when—

At a turn in the hall, Uotani stood wispily like a phantom, hugging her woven crimson ball to her chest.

It was so sudden that I thought my heart was going to stop.

"U-Uotani, how are you feeling? You still look a little pale."

Uotani reached an arm out and took a tight grip on the hem of my shirt, her look languishing, then said, "…Please don't be alone if you can help it."

"Huh?"

I was just about to ask her what she meant when she released her grip and ran down the stairs.

What was that about…?

My limbs grew even colder.

It really would have been better if Ryuto had stayed.

When I went back to the room, Tohko was sitting on a chair, her head drooping. I saw how sad her eyes looked and my heart skipped a beat.

I recalled once again the look I'd seen at dawn.

While I stood there frozen, my chest squeezing tight, Tohko raised her face and her eyes widened.

"Oh no, when did you get here? You took your time, didn't you?"

Yuri's diary was open in her lap.

The thought that she'd been making such a sad face because of the diary gave me a moment of relief, but then it bugged me because I didn't think she'd had Yuri's diary open that time at dawn.

What was it in that diary that made Tohko so melancholy? Obviously it told a heartrending story, but…

"The tea is totally cold. What were you talking about with Ryuto?"

Tohko closed the diary. Just before she did it, my eyes caught the red dianthus.

"That bookmark—"

"Hmm?"

Tohko reopened the diary she had just closed.

The bookmark with the pressed dianthus glued to it was stuck inside.

"You mean this?"

"Yes. Has that always been stuck in there?"

"Yeah."

"Do you think Maki put it there?"

"I don't think so. It's not her style."

"Then who did?"

Whatever else it was, I doubted an eighty-year-old pressed flower would have such a vibrant color.

Which meant that someone had read this diary before Maki got her hands on it.

I wondered if Tohko had considered that possibility, too. With a mild look on her face, she murmured, "It's probably…someone who knows Shirayuki very well."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm…not sure yet myself. But I'm imagining something."

Tohko pressed her lips together.

I wasn't sure whether I should tell Tohko about the conversation I'd just heard between all the servants or about how Uotani had warned me.

She looked so listless, I didn't want to worry her.

"Anyway, Konoha, you haven't managed to avoid the question."

"Huh?"

"What did you talk about with Ryuto? It wasn't something lewd that you can't tell me about, was it?"

Tohko pouted and glowered up at me through her eyelashes.

It completely backfired on me. Tohko pried into every little thing, even stuff I didn't have a clue about, and she got me sweating good.

When afternoon came around, Tohko went to the book room and walked around it, looking intently at the ceiling and walls and window, apparently thinking about something.

I left the room partway through Tohko's inspection to go to the bathroom.

I finished my business, washed my hands at the sink, and when I opened the door, a piece of white paper that had been folded in half dropped to the floor.

That wasn't there when I went in, I thought suspiciously as I picked it up and looked inside. There was something written on it in ballpoint pen.

Konoha Inoue

I'll be waiting at the mountain pond at three.
I have something important to tell you, so please come in secret, so that no one sees you.

Sayo

It was from Uotani!

My heart constricted with nerves.

What could it be? If she was calling me out to the pond, was it something she couldn't talk about in the house?

But hadn't Uotani told me I mustn't go to the pond? Plus, she'd told me not to be alone if I could help it—

Hmm. Something wasn't making sense.

When I looked at my watch, I saw there were only twenty minutes left before three.

I went to the kitchen, just to see.

"Excuse me, is Uotani here?"

The housekeeper told me she'd left a few moments ago to buy groceries.

Had she gone to the pond? So was this note really from Uotani? If so, maybe I ought to go, too.

There was no time to hesitate, so I left the house and headed toward the pond in resignation. Strangely, Baron didn't appear, even though he always barked whenever I went outside.

I walked along a sunlit path, and when I reached the pond, there was no sign of anyone.

The expanse of the water's surface was glistening quietly, sucking in the light from the sky, just like when I'd come here before with Tohko. The cool breeze that smelled of greenery rustled the leaves on the trees and the grass at my feet, and small bugs were flying around me.

Maybe Uotani wasn't here yet…

And just then—

A hand reached out behind me and pressed something cold against my face.

There was some kind of drug soaked into it!

A sour smell assaulted my nostrils and my spine trembled, sensing physical danger.

I tried to turn around but was restrained by sturdy arms and couldn't budge. The body against my back was large and hard. Just as I was conjecturing that it was an adult man, I lost consciousness.

Chapter 6—A Crimson World

I wonder what Shirayuki was.

That's what I thought about in the pitch-blackness.

My image of Shirayuki was a woman with long white hair, standing in the center of a pond illuminated by cold moonlight on a silent night.

"Cast a bell for the temple, set it at the foot of the mountain, and toll this bell thrice daily, startle me, and so force me to recall our promise."

A commanding voice spilling from sensual red lips.

It resembled Maki's voice. My voice and Tohko's as we read *Demon Pond* aloud played over that and made the voice multilayered.

The darkness of the night shivered with cold.

"…My sex dreams of liberty. It desires free will. It yearns to be selfish."

"If you were, you would forget the promise and attempt to fill the seven highways of the Northwest with the waters of your little pond."

Sealed within the bell, which her gaze never left, the desire for revenge, felt by a creature whose freedom had been stolen, burned in a pale fire like demon's breath.

"In the name of my freedom, the lives of the human cattle of the world count as nothing. But I will not shirk the promise, I will not break the vow. I will not allow them to forget our vow, however. Neglect not to ring the temple bell that you may attempt to remind me of it."

"Ring the bell, ring the bell forever," Shirayuki repeated. That was proof of the vow. Don't forget. Ring the bell. Ring the bell. Ring the bell.

When I woke up, I felt a stabbing pain at my temples.

Where was I?!

I leaped to my feet in a panic.

A wooden ceiling, mat flooring, sliding paper doors—a clean, elegant room in a

traditional inn? I had been put to bed in a futon on the floor made up with white sheets that smelled of sunlight.

"So you're awake."

The door opened and a tall adult man wearing a suit entered. It was Takamizawa from Maki's house. He'd brought me to the villa. What was he doing here?!

Perhaps the effects of the drug I'd inhaled before passing out were still lingering, because my thoughts refused to come together. I felt as if I were still dreaming. The sound of trees rustling rang in my ears.

"I apologize for using such aggressive methods. Everything will be over quite soon."

His gentle tone didn't suit this bizarre situation at all. My heart thrummed even harder and I grew disoriented.

"What's going to be over? What's going to happen to me?"

Outside, I heard rain.

Takamizawa smiled placidly to calm me down.

"I will send you to your home in Tokyo, perhaps as early as tomorrow, so there's no need to be concerned. I will guarantee the safety of Tohko Amano as well, of course. Actually, I meant to go up to the house to get you, but…the plan changed slightly and I suppose I caught you off guard. I'm truly sorry for that."

"Did Maki order you to kidnap me? What is she trying to do?"

Though I glared at him, the smile stayed on Takamizawa's face.

"I can't answer that," he replied in a kind, placid voice, though there was force to it.

Several minute tremors ran down my spine and an uncomfortable sweat covered my palms. Beyond the white paper walls, the rain picked out a subdued melody.

"Excuse me. A guest has arrived."

"A guest?"

Takamizawa's face looked just a touch suspicious at the message a waitress brought him. He gave me another calm look and said, "I'll bring your dinner later," then closed the sliding door and left with the waitress.

I was left by myself.

What should I do?

I knew I wasn't in any physical danger. If I just waited here obediently, I would be taken home safe and sound.

Wasn't that best?

I didn't need to get involved in this ridiculous situation any further. I wasn't suited for suspense or for adventure.

And he'd even told me he would guarantee Tohko's safety.

Ah, but Tohko would go out and stick her nose into danger. If she were to run wild the way she always did and something were to happen—

There was a flash of heat in my brain and a sharp pain coursed through it, as if I had been pierced.

I just couldn't do it!

I had to get back to the mansion!

I got out of the bed and opened the door. Takamizawa wasn't in the next room. I didn't see my shoes so I gave up and went out into the hall in my slippers.

A waitress walked up to me and my heart somersaulted.

"Is something the matter?"

"Uh, umm…where are your baths?"

"Oh, you mean the hot springs? They're…"

The waitress showed me the way.

Outside, a fine rain was falling. At the entrance to the covered walkway, I told her, "I can find it from here," and she left me on my own.

When I was sure that I could no longer see her, I went down the walkway in my slippers, then lost myself among the trees and murkiness in the garden before I ran off.

Luckily for me, the town was a narrow strip, so when I reached a major road, I could pretty much guess how to get back to the mansion.

The road was dark, but it was still only drizzling so I thought I could work with this.

I hurried forward in my slippers, although they made it harder to walk.

As it turned out, things started to get bad after I left the town for the mountain itself. The fact that there were no lights to illuminate my path utterly crushed me for some reason. I had been raised in the city, where having light even at night was taken for granted.

The absolute blackness that fell overhead obliterated my vision in the darkness and the outlines of objects were indistinct—even with my arms stretched out I was engulfed in the eerie blackness. The total darkness reminded me of primeval nights, thriving even now in the mountain.

It was inky black whichever way I turned. The rain-slicked faces of the leaves would glint every now and then, but other than that I couldn't see anything. It was as though I was groping my way forward with my eyes closed.

I would get smacked suddenly on the cheek by a tree branch, or ivy would dangle in front of my face and I would think it was a snake and jump back, or my foot would catch on a root poking out of the ground—the fundamental fear of the *unseen* made me choke and threatened to crush my chest.

Unfortunately for me, the rain intensified, the ground turned to mud, and my vision blurred. Even my sense of hearing was frustrated by the sound of the pounding rain. My soaked body grew colder and colder, and though it was summer, I was shuddering with cold as if I had gone out into the middle of winter in only a T-shirt. My fingers and toes were even getting numb.

My throat tightened, my breathing intensified, and I thought my heart would tear in half.

The cold rain stabbed at my skin. From time to time, the water that had collected on the leaves cascaded down like waterfalls.

I had gotten small cuts on my arms and face, the only spots where warmth gathered. The bottoms of my slippers got soaked by the rain and started slipping off.

There were plenty of times I thought I would fall over.

Light flashed over my head and a rumble rolled across the sky.

Lightning!

Terror coursed down my spine.

I'd be in danger if I was under a tree. Plus I'd heard that being wet made it easier for lightning to strike you. But with the rain falling on the mountain at night, where could I go?

There was nowhere to run—

Lightning cracked explosively and I flinched. I'd left my despair behind for surging anger.

What in the world was I doing? I didn't know the way back. This was an utter disaster. I was out of my mind. Crazy!

Wouldn't it be best to stay put until it got lighter at dawn? I was tired. I didn't want to walk anymore.

Even so, when I recalled the sad look that I had seen Tohko wearing that day at dawn, my feet moved forward of their own accord.

Tohko didn't know that I'd gone out. She'd suddenly lost track of me, so I knew she would be worried. She could be making that heart-wrenching face again. She could be sad somewhere.

She could be terrified, frightened by a ghost. Because even though she put on a brave face and acted tough, she was actually so unbearably scared of ghosts that she forced her way into my room and snuggled into my bed every night.

She'd been the same during the Amemiya thing, too. She would declare that there's no such thing as ghosts, but when we were shut into that basement room together, she'd crouched on the floor and buried her face in her knees and said, "*I'm afraid of ghosts*," and wept like a child.

I didn't want anything bad to happen to you, Tohko. I mean, you fly off the handle so quickly and do crazy things, so…I was worried.

The curious, bitter sweetness I'd felt when I had knelt down in front of her and comforted her was slowly resurfacing in me.

I wasn't confident or optimistic enough to think I could protect Tohko when something happened. Trying to protect someone other than myself was an arrogant idea. I lacked that willpower and strength.

But—but if Tohko was crying like that, couldn't I at least be at her side?

At the very least, couldn't I give her a handkerchief?

A brilliant light flashed through the sky with a rumble.

The innumerable trees it had illuminated looked like a band of ghouls mocking me.

All I could hear was the thunder, the wind, and the rain.

If this was all a dream, how amazing that would have been.

Gritting my teeth, I steeled my nerves until it felt as if my temples would split and moved forward, relying on the single, momentary flash of lightning.

Mud was clinging to the bottoms of my slippers. They were totally sodden.

Just then, panting raggedly, I saw a tiny light dart faintly across my vision.

A firefly…?

It couldn't be. Not in this violent rain.

Besides, Maki had told us the season for fireflies was over and that no matter how much she waited at the pond, she hadn't managed to see a single one.

Even so, there was definitely a faint, elusive light that seemed as if it would wink out at any moment bobbing before my eyes.

The light glided over the ground.

Thinking the pond might be its destination, I chased after it desperately.

I don't believe in ghosts.

When people die, they just return to the earth.

But still the hope the little light brought me was immense and filled me with unshakable strength. It instantly lifted my spirits. I even thought Amemiya's spirit had come to save me, something I would ordinarily be mortified of to the point of blushing.

When I pushed back the tree branches, now loaded with raindrops, I found the lake, filled with glossy black water.

Above it, a single faint light bobbed, flashing.

There was just one road from here to the house! I was sure of it!

I was saved. I could go back!

Just then, I heard a voice.

"…Aaaaa."

"Ko…haaaaa."

"Konohaaa."

Once again, a shock of disbelief shot through me.

The voice was coming closer and closer, and I held my breath and listened hard.

A voice calling my name in the darkness.

A voice searching for me.

Warm, orange lamplight was bouncing through the branches.

At last, the figure of Tohko appeared, wearing a plastic raincoat over her head and holding a flashlight in one hand.

I'm sure my face looked totally idiotic.

My hands fell limp at my sides and I stood there, soaked to the bone by the rain. Tohko was looking at me, sniffling.

The thunder had grown distant, but the rain still fell fiercely.

For a while, the two of us stood at a distance, looking at each other.

"Konoha…?"

Looking crestfallen, Tohko spoke my name timidly, as if to confirm it was me.

"…Yes," I answered, dazed.

Still looking at me with fright, Tohko tilted her head slightly to one side, and she asked, "You…have feet. So you're…not a ghost, right?"

"I'm cold and soaked and have cuts all over and I'm wearing slippers and everything's terrible, but I'm still alive."

Her slender body, swaddled in the plastic raincoat, sent drops of water flying as she came to hug me.

Water splashed up into my face. Since I was already soaked in the rain, I didn't mind.

"Oh, thank *goodness*, I can actually touch you. You really are alive. I thought I would have to dredge the lake. That I should have brought a rake. I'm so glad you're alive!"

"Why would you assume I was dead?"

"But I mean, I heard you took your stuff and went home all by yourself, so I was really worried. It's weird that you would leave without saying anything. But then you didn't come back when it got dark, and I couldn't get hold of Ryuto, either, and it started raining, and there was lightning even, and I just couldn't stay inside."

"It was reckless to come looking for me on a night like this, with the rain and storm and lightning."

With her arms still wrapped around me, Tohko lifted her face up and pouted.

"You're one to talk! What were you doing out here in slippers without so much as an umbrella? Where did you go?"

"I was kidnapped by a bad person, but I escaped."

"What're you talking about?"

"Anyway, let's go back to the house," I prompted Tohko. "I'll explain on the way."

We started walking.

Before I realized it, Tohko was squeezing my hand tightly. My hand and her hand were both soaking wet in the rain and dripping with water and freezing cold. But even so, a sliver of warmth seeped into my skin like a ray of sunlight.

Tohko's presence, her warmth, came through my palm.

And the fact that Tohko was shivering.

"Are you afraid of ghosts?"

"N-no!"

"Your voice is squeaky."

"It's just because I'm cold."

She denied it, shaking her head from side to side, but it was blindingly obvious that she was terrified.

She hated ghosts so much she was trembling. But even though it was only natural

that she would be afraid of going at night to a lake that a ghoul was supposed to haunt, she'd come looking for me because she was worried.

In the midst of rain and lightning, wearing a raincoat, dripping wet like a paper doll.

Each time Tohko's fingers flinched, I felt warmth swell up in my chest.

Tohko was stubbornly silent out of embarrassment.

"M-more importantly, what did you mean about being kidnapped?"

As I moved down the path illuminated by the flashlight, hand in hand with Tohko, I told her about everything that had happened.

"Mr. Takamizawa knocked you out and took you away?"

Tohko's eyes were round with surprise.

"I can't believe you got away and made it here. I'm glad nothing bad happened to you."

"Amemiya…"

"What?"

"Nothing."

If I told her that Amemiya had saved me, she would probably laugh at me. No, maybe she would get scared that a ghost had appeared and be even more scared than she was now.

"Today was definitely my lucky day."

I would keep the part about Amemiya my personal secret.

Tohko's smile seemed to spill out of her. A flower bloomed in the darkness of the night.

"Yeah. It was a five-star lucky day for Pisces."

"Isn't that your sign?"

"I had good luck, and that's how I found you, no?"

"I don't know about that."

"No, it's a truth of the universe. If you don't pay me even more respect and be nice to me, you're going to get punished."

"I can't respect a president who tears up my English notes on the sly and sneaks bites of Bradbury's 'The Fog Horn.'"

"Th-that was…I just—"

Tohko fumbled for words.

"And who was it that ate the erotic story someone dropped in your goblin mailbox in the school yard and got sick, so they had to skip fifth period to go collapse in the clubroom? I had to take care of you that day and I couldn't go to class, either."

"It's not a goblin mailbox, it's a love advice mailbox. And it's not like I asked you to stay with me. You decided to skip all on your own."

"When someone bitterly asks you, 'Are you abandoning your presideeeeent?' you *have* to stay."

"Well, um…that kind of thing *might* have happened once or twice."

What exactly were we talking about?

While we worked our way down every digression like usual, the mansion came

into view.

The gloomy mood that the deformed building gave off stirred up our forgotten anxiety and fear.

"That's strange. There isn't a single light on."

"Maybe the power's out?" Tohko murmured timidly.

We opened the creaking gate and headed to the front door. We rang the doorbell, but there was no answer.

Tohko gulped and pushed at the doors.

With a grating *creak*, the doors swung open to either side.

At our feet crouched a dark something. The instant Tohko turned the light of the flashlight onto it, she shrieked.

It was Baron's corpse lying at the entrance, with foam coming out of his mouth and his eyes bulging out.

"B-Baron…"

Tohko whispered in a wavering voice, rooted in place.

I felt a shudder, too, as if a cold hand had taken hold of my neck.

The mass murder that had occurred at the mansion eighty years earlier—the man at the souvenir shop had told us that one of the five casualties had been *a dog*. That it had died *with foam coming out of its mouth—*

When I came back to my senses, I realized the sprinklers, which were fixed on the ceiling, were whining in the darkness and spinning around. The water spewing out of them soaked the floor and stairs.

"Let me see your flashlight."

I took the flashlight from Tohko and shone it on the stairs. When I did, we saw several gashes cut into the wall by a sharp blade and a spray of red that could have been blood.

What on earth had happened?

There was a powerful gust of wind behind our ice-cold backs, and the doors we'd left ajar slammed shut loudly. Tohko jumped, surprised by the noise, and just then there came a noise from the second floor.

Tohko jumped again.

I felt a tremor run down my spine, too.

I pressed down on my chest, which was raging almost painfully, and listened hard. I definitely heard someone on the second floor!

I could clearly hear the sound of something falling, the sound of a chair scraping, the sound of steps on the floor.

Unsettling sounds, as if people were struggling—!

The sound of a gunshot punctured my ears.

We ran up the stairs as if drawn by it.

Now we heard the sound of glass shattering.

It was in Maki's room!

The moment we opened the door and shone the flashlight inside, the first thing our eyes caught was the back of a tiny figure wearing a white maid's cap, with her

hair in two pigtails.

A long, black, sticklike object stuck out from her right shoulder. It trailed a thin line of smoke, and we caught a sour smell, as if something was burning.

As soon as I realized it was a shotgun, a chill went through my entire body.

What was Uotani doing with that?!

The window glass they had just replaced yesterday was shattered. Maki stood in front of it, biting down on her lip, her eyes narrowed, and a harsh look on her face. She pressed a hand down on her left arm to stop the blood flowing from it.

Had Uotani shot her?!

But why?

After a closer look, I saw that Maki also gripped a scythe in the hand of her wounded arm.

What was going on in this house? What had happened to the others?

"Stop it, Sayo!" Tohko screamed.

Uotani spun around. Her tiny face was pure white in the light of the flashlight, her hair disheveled, her lips cracked, and her eyes glinting like a savage animal's.

Seeing Tohko, dripping water from her raincoat, and me, soaking wet, Uotani's eyes widened in shock for only a moment.

"*Miss Yuri!* You and Mr. Akira are safe."

Miss Yuri? Mr. Akira? Was she confusing us for them?

Uotani gave a fierce smile loaded with madness and hatred, as if she were truly possessed by something.

"It's all right; *this time* I won't let you dirty your hands, Miss Yuri. I'll do it myself."

My skin prickled instantaneously. What was Uotani saying?!

"It's all the Himekuras' fault! Oath breakers!"

The muzzle of the gun was pointed at Maki.

"Sayo! I'm not Yuri! Please don't do this!"

It was as if Tohko's voice didn't entirely reach Uotani's ears. Panting wildly, as if in pain, she fixed on her target and put her finger on the trigger.

Maki glared at Uotani piercingly, then dropped both her hands and shouted, “If you want to shoot me, then do it! But I don’t know anything about a promise! I have no obligation to keep it!”

Rage exploded over Uotani’s face like fire.

Tohko shouted “No!!” and I surged at Uotani to pin her arms down from behind.

A gunshot so loud it seemed to rupture my eardrums rang through the room and gun smoke rose into the air.

The gun had shifted, so the bullet it released had ripped a hole in the wall.

“Stay out of it!”

It wasn’t Uotani who shouted that at me, but Maki.

I watched in shock as Maki threw her sickle away, practically hurling it at the ground.

There was a *thunk*, and the sickle lodged into the floor.

She strode past it toward us, blood still flowing from her arm.

Uotani leveled the gun again.

If she shot from here, there was no question it would rip open Maki’s chest. But despite that Maki’s eyes were sharp and fierce, as if she was the one closing in on her opponent instead.

“Go ahead! Shoot! Your promise has nothing to do with me! I can’t be bound by something like that!”

Uotani’s voice trembled with spite.

“But everything—it’s the Himekuras’ fault…!”

“What promise did the Himekuras make?”

The air was so shockingly tense it prickled my skin. Maki’s eyes were fixed directly on Uotani’s. Uotani bit down on her lip, and returning Maki’s glare, she said, “That as long as Shirayuki exists, they wouldn’t lay a hand on the house.”

“That was with my grandfather—Mitsukuni Himekura?”

“That’s right! With your grandfather! And with Yuri’s father, too! Fifty years ago and eighty years ago—both of the leaders of the Himekura family made promises to Shirayuki!”

Maki spoke derisively.

“I don’t believe you. Why would they make a meaningless promise like that? You’re lying, aren’t you? There’s no benefit whatsoever to the Himekuras in keeping a promise like that.”

Her words were surely impossible for Uotani to forgive. Her cheeks flared with rage and frustration.

“The Himekura masters made the promise in order to hide their own sins! Because it was the Himekuras who killed Akira!”

I could hear Tohko gasp behind me.

I, too, felt as if a flaming arrow had pierced my heart.

The Himekuras had killed Akira?

What was she talking about?! I thought Akira had tossed Yuri aside and left the estate. I thought he’d studied abroad in Germany.

Uotani spat her answer out in an unbroken stream, as if she was freeing the emotions she’d kept restrained. Maki glared at her with a harsh expression, as if she refused to let a single word slip by unheard.

“Mr. Akira was an obstacle to the Himekuras! They were afraid he would take Miss Yuri away with him. So in order to keep her, all of the servants conspired to kill Mr. Akira. They had orders from the Himekuras to do it. They put poison into his food, then tried to hide it by throwing his body in the pond!

“Grandma realized what had happened so she killed the butler with a sickle!

“But the gardener, the cook, the housekeeper—they all attacked her with kitchen knives and hatchets, so then it was my grandma’s turn to nearly be killed. Then Miss Yuri got a gun and came to save her.

“The two of them got the gardener and the cook and the housekeeper.”

Was she saying that an eight-year-old girl had killed four people with the help of a girl in her teens?!

That Hiroko was not in fact the one who discovered the bodies, but instead was there the whole time and had *assisted* in the murders?!

My spine trembled at the incredible nature of her raving.

And then the idea that the servants who’d been the victims had conspired to kill Akira!

“My grandma told me how Miss Yuri was drenched in water and cried the whole time she was shooting them. She had tried to pull Mr. Akira out of the pond, but the weeds tangled around him, and even though she tried to cut them away with a sickle, the water was too murky and it didn’t go well and she wound up cutting up Mr. Akira’s body, and it was so sad and painful that she went crazy.

“And after they’d taken revenge for Mr. Akira, when my grandma and Miss Yuri finally pulled Mr. Akira up together, she hugged Mister Akira’s armless body and cried, *‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry.’* Mr. Akira still lies beneath the shrine!”

A crazed woman covered in blood, crawling up from the pond. A white arm clutched in her hands.

The ancient scene floated through my mind as goose bumps rose on my skin.

And after that, the garden dyed in the crimson sunset.

A tiny girl pressing her hands together at an old stone shrine. It hadn’t been Yuri’s grave—it was Akira’s!

“This house is where Miss Yuri and Mr. Akira met—the precious place where Mr. Akira rests.

“Eighty years ago, in exchange for keeping the incident a secret, the Himekuras promised not to lay a finger on either Mr. Akira’s grave or the house. Grandma always protected the house after that.

“Pretended to be Shirayuki and kept the villagers from getting close the whole time.

“The same when the next Himekura master came to the estate fifty years ago—”

Maki leaned forward.

In the roar of the wind blowing through the window and the sound of the rain, Uotani told us the next part in a hard voice.

“Mitsukuni Himekura broke the promise and set fire to the house, trying to burn it down. Like you, he tried to tear down Miss Yuri and Mr. Akira’s house and eradicate it.

“Grandma had been watching the Himekuras the whole time. And she damaged one eye of the Himekura who set the fire and made him renew the promise in exchange for saving his life.

“That as long as Shirayuki existed, he would never again touch the mansion.

“I’ve heard stories about Miss Yuri from Grandma ever since I was little. After Grandma died, I inherited Shirayuki from her.”

What could she mean?

Thinking of the long years that had passed, my head spun.

“As long as Shirayuki exists, you will neither demolish the house nor destroy the pond.”

What thoughts had gone through Uotani’s grandmother’s mind while she protected the estate as Shirayuki?

Putting on a white wig on moonlit nights, haunting the house and pond, and making the villagers think that Shirayuki was still present in the land.

When someone threatened to develop the mountain or destroy the house, she caused accidents and spread rumors that it was Shirayuki’s curse.

And after she died, her granddaughter, Uotani, had done it.

Thus, each time plans were brought forth for development, Shirayuki appeared, and when he heard of it, the Himekura master knew the promise lived on and put a stop to the development.

It had happened time after time through eighty whole years!

Maki’s grandfather had sent her here knowing all of this.

In order to test how much his successor could do in this place where the power of the Himekuras didn’t reach?

Or underestimating her, assuming that she would be unable to do anything or to discover his secret?

Whichever it was, Maki had been in the palm of his hand.

Her jaw taut, Maki asked, “You were the one who threw the threatening letter in at me and the one who dumped blood and fish guts on me, too.”

“That’s right! I’ll protect this house in Grandma’s place!”

A powerful spark came into Uotani’s eyes, and she pushed the muzzle of the gun into Maki’s neck until it dug in.

“Now, you promise! Then I’ll spare you.”

Her voice and expression were heavy with intent that said this was no threat—she meant it.

Even so, she was actually scared. She probably also had questions and hesitated. Her hands trembled ever so slightly as she held the gun.

If we tried to stop her clumsily, the finger on the trigger would shift and the bullets seemed likely to rip through Maki’s throat. I couldn’t move.

I was sure Tohko was in the same frame of mind, swallowing a lump in her throat and watching this exchange closely behind me.

“Go on! Make your decision! If you refuse, I’ll shoot you to death right here!”

The heat drained from Maki’s face rapidly. She dropped her eyes in apparent boredom, and in a horribly cold voice she whispered, “…Ridiculous.”

Uotani’s eyes widened in shock.

I couldn’t believe what I’d heard, either. What was Maki saying, especially now,

with the barrel of a gun pressed against her throat?!

"Is that what the promise was? My grandfather wanted to hide something so trivial? He avoided demolishing this one tiny house over the fact that the young Himekura lady was the one who committed the ruthless murders eighty years ago? That's all?"

Uotani's arms and shoulders shook even harder and more obviously than before.

At the same time that hatred showed on her young face, confusion and uneasiness and fear did, too, as if she was looking upon something incomprehensible.

Maki lifted her gaze. She was like the dragon princess imprisoned in the pond—her eyes glinting with repressed bitterness, her beautifully sculpted eyebrows bristling, and in a voice filled with irritation, she asked, "Despite the fact that the Himekuras have always been a family painted in blood?

"Are you telling me that there hasn't been a single murderer or criminal among the Himekuras before now?

"While sitting majestically on high, without sullying their own hands, they look down calmly upon people being murdered like pigs for the feast without raising an eyebrow. That kind of shameless arrogance has been rank in the Himekuras, now and in the past. It would make you sick to know how often.

"I'm sure Grandpa himself has used thoroughly questionable methods to get where he is and crushed the people who got in his way. And yet he couldn't allow *something like this*? Are appearances that important to him? Are the Himekuras supposed to be some pure and just noble family that nobody points the finger at behind their backs?

"It doesn't shock me to hear that Yuri killed everyone.

"This promise is a farce. I would die of embarrassment if it weren't so pathetic."

"Maki!" Tohko shouted, as if to say, "Don't say another word."

Uotani bit down on her lip and pulled the trigger.

My brain went all white with pain, as if my beating heart had been shot out.

There was no more avoiding the nightmare laid out before me—

But no bullet was released from the gun.

Uotani jerked her finger again and again in a panic. There was only the clicking of the trigger and nothing happened.

Watching Uotani do this with cold eyes, Maki informed her, "That gun only holds five shots. You wasted too many."

The sweat that had broken out on my body chilled all at once.

Maki roughly slapped away the gun that was shoved into her neck with one hand.

Uotani was flabbergasted and she stiffened.

Then a look of fear came suddenly over her face and she began quaking. A true monster stood before her, leaping with pale flames of rage and trying to bring judgment down on a foolish human.

Just as Uotani's legs seemed ready to crumple beneath her, a white hand touched her from behind.

Uotani looked up over her shoulder in surprise and found that the book girl with the long braids, who was still dripping water from her raincoat, was the one gently

supporting her arms.

Her clear gaze, which seemed to purify the dark and stagnant air, looked straight at Maki.

The light of her flashlight made the water droplets on her raincoat glisten, making it seem as if Tohko were wreathed in stars.

"You realized from the start that Sayo was Shirayuki, didn't you?"

Maki looked back at Tohko with a tightly grim expression.

Maki had known Shirayuki's true identity? Uotani looked flabbergasted again.

I gasped, too, as if the very core of my brain had been struck.

The cold sound of rain filled the room, which had fallen into silence.

Tohko's voice flowed smoothly into it.

"The name Chiro comes up a lot in Yuri's diary. 'I went for a walk with Chiro,' 'Chiro got bitten by Baron'—from reading that, you might think that Chiro is a cherished pet, but on the night of the slaughter eighty years ago, Chiro's body wasn't in the house.

"That's because Chiro was the girl who was the sole survivor—Hiroko, Sayo's grandmother. Chiro was her nickname."

Chiro—

Hiro—

The two names rose up in my mind. The puppy Chiro and the human girl Hiro. The two of them melded together to form a girl of eight who resembled Uotani.

Uotani's grandmother had been Yuri's companion the whole time!

"Toward the end of the diary, it says that Chiro got bitten by Baron and was badly hurt. Around the same time, Hiroko went back to her family in the country. Couldn't that have been in order to recover from her injuries? And then when she came back, she discovered that Yuri's lover Akira had been killed and Hiroko took revenge."

Uotani hung her head, tears in her eyes. I guess Tohko's "imagination" was accurate.

"Maki, you read the diary before we did. And you had this same 'imagination.'"

Maki answered frigidly, "I didn't imagine it, I logically deduced it. A mass murder happens in a house and only one person survives. It's obvious to suspect the one who survives as the perpetrator. Plus, Hiroko happened to be on the scene at the fire fifty years ago. No way that's a coincidence."

"Hiroko had a secret—you concluded that. And you imagined—I mean, deduced that Hiroko was Shirayuki."

But why would Hiroko pretend to be Shirayuki? And why were the Himekuras afraid of her? I didn't understand it.

"Shirayuki and the Himekuras—was there not a hidden promise between each of them? Did that not relate to the incident eighty years ago?

"That's what you thought, and so *you decided to draw out the nature of the*

promise from Shirayuki.

"Hiroko passed away last year. So you summoned Sayo, Hiroko's granddaughter and the next Shirayuki, to the house where the incident occurred eighty years ago."

Uotani looked at Maki, her face blanching.

Maki listened to Tohko's story with a haughty look that no longer registered Uotani's presence.

"Everything was devised to flush Shirayuki out.

"You built your set and arrayed it with a butler, a cook, a housekeeper, a gardener, a maid, a dog—and even a young lady, a student, and a goblin, exactly like eighty years ago. And to top it off, you acted like you were going to demolish the house and manipulated Shirayuki into appearing."

Tohko went on.

Shirayuki had appeared exactly as Maki had planned. Uotani had been the one who sent the threatening letter and dumped water with fish blood in it off the roof. Overjoyed by the signs of movement, Maki had caused an uproar herself in order to draw Shirayuki out even further.

"The fish scattered around the book room and making Shirayuki appear was a performance, wasn't it? It was impossible for Sayo to manage all of that. But you could have done it, Maki.

"You inflicted it on the other actors—the butler and all the others. The Shirayuki that night was a projection you set up in the room ahead of time and made lifelike.

"The arms reaching through the window were real, but that could be done by someone pretending to run out of the room, then hurrying around outside and breaking the window and sticking their hands through."

I recalled the terrified faces of the butler and all the others.

And then the whispered conversation I'd heard through the door.

"But we've kept the promise!"

The promise had been a contract between Maki and them.

Had they known that eighty years ago their relatives had been the aggressors rather than the victims? Or had they simply been employed by Maki without knowing anything? Could their cowardly eyes filled with fear have been…? No, whatever the case, they were actors who had behaved in complete accordance with Maki's script.

"Sayo was confounded by the appearance of a Shirayuki other than herself and got frightened. In such a situation, she couldn't keep her promise to her grandmother. She could hear the rhyme her grandmother had taught her playing on a loop in her mind, and it haunted her to the point that she couldn't sleep that night."

"The promise…it's…," Uotani had murmured as she turned pale and trembled. Uotani had been utterly filled with terror at that moment.

"And then to top it all off you called Konoha away with a fake letter and made it look like he'd gone back to Tokyo. When I went to look for Konoha, that figured into your calculations, too, right?"

Maki's face turned a little bit sour.

"I didn't plan on Ryuto Sakurai coming. Because of him, I had to accelerate my plans."

Takamizawa had said the same thing. That he had intended to go and get me, but the plan had changed slightly. He had been playing the role of the one who "comes to get" me from Tokyo the whole time.

Tohko made her eyes stern and asked, "You were also the one who fed poison to Baron, aren't you, Maki?"

A smile cold enough to make me shudder came over Maki's face.

"Yes, he devoured his food without question. That was the guard dog's failing—for the Baron of eighty years ago and the Baron of today."

She couldn't mean it—was she saying that dog had been set up in order to kill it? *In order to make her prey, Uotani, think of Akira being fed poison and dying?* For that reason only without the slightest hesitation?

"Ah…augh…!"

The gun fell from Uotani's hands. She put both hands to her mouth as her face twisted in fear, and she trembled.

She had inherited her grandmother's drive and had protected the house with everything she had, but it had all been a ploy.

Plus, the opponent she had been trying to fight had been an even more ruthless Shirayuki than she herself.

Witnessing that coldness—that mercilessness—Uotani lacked the energy to resist her anymore.

I felt Uotani's despair and my spine trembled, too. Maki, who had calmly orchestrated this cruel play, was so terrifying it made it hard to breathe in her presence.

"The curtain is falling…and it was an unbelievable farce."

A creature murmuring as her eyes glinted coldly, mocking people—she was Shirayuki.

"What a sad excuse for a trump card…It truly is unspeakably ridiculous to be bound by immaterial things like family or bloodlines or promises."

The coldness of her look, the frigid tone of her voice, the waves of crazed rage that radiated from her entire body seemed to freeze us as we watched her. Like the fish in *Demon Pond* who can only quail at Shirayuki's rage.

"Whatever becomes of a human life, it is no concern of mine!"

"Ancestors are ancestors, and parents are parents; they toyed with promises and vows as it suited them. When a human grows aged and slights the promise, what is there to fear in my breaking that vow one moment sooner?"

"But these are Himekuras," Maki went on muttering distantly. "They imprisoned their daughter in the heart of the mountains and had her lover murdered for the sake of the family's honor. And the girl managed to slaughter people for the sake of

revenge… Even now, this house, this land, is shackled by fear… Hardly a noble family. We're a cursed clan washed in blood."

Out of nowhere, flames leaped into her eyes and she shouted an assault.

"I wish the world would end and destroy everything!"

The sadness inside her ferocity made my chest burn.

Outright loathing. Unending frustration.

It would go on as long as Maki was a Himekura.

She was a Shirayuki who had lost her Yuri in Hotaru.

The dragon princess who lost her source of consolation raged and caused floods and didn't stop until she had swallowed up the world.

The moon cracked and flowers fell.

Beautiful illusions transformed into nightmares.

When it seemed that we were about to be swallowed up by an inky nightmare, a voice rang out like light cutting through the darkness.

"No. The curtain hasn't fallen yet."

Tohko looked at Maki with noble eyes.

We gasped as the book girl shed her raincoat and walked toward the dragon princess before our eyes.

In the light of her flashlight, the water droplets glinted golden and fell away.

The unsullied coolness reached Uotani's face, and her eyes widened in surprise.

Tohko's posture as she stood swathed in her white dress was wispy and gentle, filled with the peace and purity of a priestess who drives away evil.

"Maki, you haven't heard the other story. The tale of Yuri and Akira isn't a revenge story. Even if it seems that way on the surface, underneath that I, as a book girl, imagine a different story."

Once she'd fixed her strong, unwavering eyes on Maki, she put on a warm smile and turned to Uotani.

"Sayo? I want you to hear the story I'm going to tell now. Listen all the way to the end without getting scared or losing hope."

At some point the rain had lessened to a drizzle.

Turning back to the ferocious dragon princess, the book girl wove her tale in a gentle voice.

"The story of Yuri and Akira begins with a book.

"It was Kyōka Izumi's *Demon Pond*, which Akira's mother had lovingly transcribed word by word and embroidered the cover of with brilliant thread. It was the only one of its kind in the whole world.

"The story features a couple named Akira Hagiwara and Yuri and a dragon princess named Shirayuki. Shirayuki is a cruel and capricious creature who causes droughts and floods, but she watched over Akira and Yuri tenderly.

"There was a Shirayuki at the real Yuri's side, too.

"Yuri feared Shirayuki's devilish nature and Shirayuki was aggravated by Yuri's timidity, but for some reason the two stayed together.

“It was impossible for them to be apart—after all, *Yuri herself was Shirayuki*.”

I’d thought that might be the case. Because Shirayuki appeared on the water’s surface at night, through windows—*always somewhere that would reflect Yuri’s face*.

Maki had probably confirmed that at least. And Uotani had known because she’d heard it from her grandmother.

“Why did Yuri need to live in a villa deep in the mountains? In her diary, Yuri writes that it’s because she’s an oracle and she’d made a promise to her father.

“The Himekura family tree began with an oracle, too.

“In the heyday of the imperial court, there was an oracle with the blood of a dragon in her veins, and they say that she protected the country through her use of a ghoul who glowed white. She was granted noble rank for her good results, and the Himekuras secured their success in the import business by being a clan that presided over the waterways and achieved remarkable wealth. Isn’t that true, Maki?”

Maki remained silent, her eyes still frigid.

Tohko went on, unconcerned.

“From time to time, an oracle would be born in the Himekura family. The oracle was always accompanied by a ghoul, and a legend was passed down saying that they brought the family prosperity. But at this point I start to imagine something.

“Why did the oracles and the ghouls only ever appear at the same time?

“What were the ghouls really?

“In the mid-1800s when the borders opened and foreigners began to come and go freely in Japan, they were feared as ogres or long-nosed goblins because their hair color, eye color, and body types were different. People speculate that the goblins that appear in old fairy tales might have been people from other countries.”

Tohko broke off for a moment. Her intelligent black eyes were looking straight at Maki.

“Perhaps the Himekura oracles were people born with white hair due to some mutation. Since they worked in imports, the Himekuras had many opportunities to come into contact with foreigners, and it’s entirely plausible that the blood of other countries could have gotten mixed in. The first oracle with the blood of dragons might have been a foreigner herself. And then through the generations, people with appearances different from Japanese people began to be born in the Himekura family. But that appearance would be seen by others as demonic, and that’s probably why they created the story of the oracle who seals in the ghoul.

“And Yuri Himekura, a ‘lily’ child as her name suggests, was born with hair as shining white as that same flower.

“That was why she was said to be a product of her mother’s infidelity. I imagine her father feared a scandal and made her live in this villa where there was no one to see her.”

Tohko said that perhaps Yuri dyed her hair black or wore a black wig most of the time.

She wrote in her diary that the pond was pretty during the day, but it was scary at night because there was a goblin in it. Perhaps, Tohko said, she feared seeing her black hair reflected in the lake, looking silvery in the moonlight.

“Yuri was forbidden from leaving the house. From her earliest memories, she had been inculcated by her father to live in hiding without letting people’s eyes fall on her. He would tell her, ‘You are the Himekura oracle so you must continue to keep the ghoul contained.’ That was their promise.”

Yuri prayed to go home.

She longed for her family living in Tokyo.

But because she believed her father’s words—because it was her promise to her

beloved father—she persevered despite her loneliness. Tohko told us this with a sad look, her eyes filled with tears.

The books her father sent her.

The words *To my daughter* written inside their covers.

Yuri had known that she was rumored to be the product of her mother's infidelity.

She always worried that she didn't resemble anyone else in her family.

Perhaps I am the child of sin like everyone says.

Perhaps my late mother did couple with a monster to have me.

Perhaps the Shirayuki inside me is the real me.

"Certainly every time Yuri felt unhappy about or irritated at or loathing for her restricted position, she felt as if there were an evil ghoul within her and she got terribly frightened. And so she wrote about Shirayuki in her diary as if it was a different person.

"The Yuri who strove to keep her promise and the Shirayuki who screamed for it to be broken—they were both how Yuri truly felt.

"Yuri thought the very act of being dissatisfied and having doubts was forbidden. And so she tried desperately to cling to the affection that her father showed her."

I am not a ghoul. I am my father's daughter. He calls me, "My daughter."

A young girl who told herself that again and again as she read his books and drove back her loneliness and tried to keep her promise.

Like the dragon god of *Demon Pond,* who asked that the temple bell be rung three times a day to remind him of his promise, her father's words written in the books were, for Yuri, the proof of his love and of their promise to each other.

"A volume arrived from father in Tokyo. Upon turning back the cover, I discovered a message from my father. Father's hand is dignified and beautiful, and it possesses a gentlemanly power. I gazed at it, and my breast swelled with happiness and remembrances of home."

"…I could never break my promise."

"I'm the oracle who prays for the prosperity of the Himekuras, and I'm my father's daughter."

Like a fragile moon floating on the water at night, sadness wavered in Tohko's eyes.

"But Yuri's father only sent books to the villa and never once went there. To him, Yuri wasn't his daughter; she was a ghoul, an illegitimate child, and a troublesome secret for the family to keep.

"So he employed people and kept a dog and made them keep watch so that Yuri would never surface. The servants at the villa were prison guards watching Yuri."

A criminal with the title of oracle.

Yuri was a prisoner of the Himekuras.

"And when Akira came to stay at the house and fell in love with Yuri, they continued watching.

"Akira tried to leave the estate in order to study abroad in Germany. At the time, Yuri feared that Akira was going to abandon her.

"Since Yuri had made a promise, she couldn't go with him.

"Plus, she was probably afraid of going outside.

"She had seen Shirayuki one night when she went to the pond with Akira, and it had almost made her heart stop, so despite her happiness she was frightened and she held Chiro and wept. From diary entries like that, we can picture Yuri's complex emotions.

"If she was at the house, as the young lady of the Himekuras, Yuri was a holy oracle and could remain the girl who was 'my daughter' to her illustrious father. But outside the estate, she suspected she would only receive cold looks for being a 'ghoul' and be ostracized. If Akira were to cast her off out there, she would lose the people who protected her and the things she could rely on."

My heart squeezed tight.

Her promise had locked Yuri up in a cage and bound her, but at the same time it had protected her from the outside world.

Was Maki, too, imagining the fear she'd felt toward losing that protection?

Though she hated the Himekuras, would she be able to live without their power? Applying that thought to her own situation—

Maki pressed her lips together, her face hard.

Tohko's face fell, too, and she looked troubled.

"Around the same time, Yuri learned the sad truth. She stole a peek at a book that had just arrived from her father and saw that there was nothing written inside the cover."

"A volume came from Father. I have nothing but that to cling to now. I thought if I could see Father's message, it might soothe me, so I went to the butler's room and tore the wrapping off the freshly arrived package and opened the book."

"But when I opened the cover, I knew that this was not a book like the others I'd received from my father up until now."

Citing Yuri's diary, Tohko told us that the book that was different from the previous ones had probably been completely blank, without her father's writing in it.

"My father's books will no longer offer me comfort. The words To my daughter *will never again echo through my heart. There is only despair like falling into a pit of darkness."*

"Even so—the books that were brought to Yuri's room after that had her father's message, 'To my daughter,' written in them in her father's hand, just like always. Yuri confesses that 'the butler brought the book from my father. It's sitting on my desk. I turned back the cover and stared at my father's message. Tears filled my eyes

and refused to stop.’”

A book with the message that shouldn’t have been there. What’s more, written in the same hand as always.

What did that mean?

Tohko’s face fell further.

“It hadn’t been her father writing the message; it was the butler, perhaps at her father’s command. He received the books and passed them on to Yuri—”

“So it was true when everyone said that I was not my father’s child, but a child of sin, born as the result of my late mother’s infidelity.

“There is no happiness left to me. If I was to meet Shirayuki now, I would surrender to her temptations.”

Her lover had decided to study abroad and was trying to leave.

Her family’s love was a fabrication.

Yuri had nothing left from which her spirit could find support.

When Tohko had read the diary before, I’d felt only quiet sorrow.

But once I learned the meaning of the words *To my daughter* written in the books and thought about Yuri’s feelings, deep black pain and despair closed in on my heart and threatened to crush it.

After that, Shirayuki appears frequently in the diary and Yuri’s mind breaks down bit by bit.

“Please, Shirayuki, don’t come here. No, you’re wrong. I’m still keeping my promise.”

“Shirayuki beckons to me from the window. I won’t go to the pond.”

“I think I’ll put up some red flowers. White flowers are so ugly—I hate them. I think I’ll tear apart every one of the white flowers, every one of them, and throw them away. I can’t go to the pond at night. After all, the moonlight is white; I mean, it’s white after all, white; I mean, it’s white, it’s white.”

“My promise. Our promise.”

“But you know—”

An even deeper sadness tinged Tohko’s eyes, her voice. As though just looking at her made it harder to breathe, as though just hearing her made my chest tighten. That kind of unsullied sadness.

“At the very end of the diary, Yuri writes that something joyous happened. That she’d made an important promise with Akira. I feel sure that it had to be a promise that Akira would be with her in the future.

“That Akira had been trying to take Yuri with him.

"That Yuri had nodded and told him yes, glowing with happiness."

Uotani choked out her voice, shouting with a look that showed she was desperately trying to stop herself from crying, "M-Mr. Akira—he told her…he wanted her to come with him…!

"The two of them promised to marry!"

So Akira hadn't cast Yuri off…

Their hearts had remained linked, just as they had been when they met.

I didn't know whether that meant salvation or despair. It simply hurt as if my heart were being pierced.

Maki glowered stubbornly at a point in space.

Rather than showing sympathy or compassion for Yuri's sorrow or Uotani's grief, Maki looked as if she felt more irritation and loathing.

Or perhaps it could have been rage for the Himekuras who'd torn the affectionate lovers apart and irritation at the fact that she shared their blood.

Tohko was looking at Maki, her gaze morose.

"When Yuri discovered that Akira had been killed and thrown into the pond, she rushed to the pond shouting Akira's name. To the villagers she passed, she must have looked like she was going to throw herself into the water and commit suicide.

"The pond was deep and Akira was tangled up in underwater weeds, so Yuri was unable to pull him up by herself. It took all the strength she had to cut off his arms. The blood that flowed from Akira's body dyed the pond red.

"When she left the pond, Yuri's hair had changed from black to white. Either her wig fell off or the dye came out. The villagers thought a ghoul had appeared and they fled. And thus the legend of Shirayuki was born."

When Yuri got back to the house, she and Hiroko took their revenge and killed the servants.

Yuri was no longer her old self.

Her promise with her father no longer held any power over her. On the contrary, her father had had Akira killed for the sake of the family's honor.

When she crawled up from the pond, Yuri had accepted the presence of Shirayuki within herself and transformed into a merciless ghoul.

Like Undine appearing from the depths, wearing a white veil on her wedding night—her white hair hanging in wet clumps, bringing a cold death to her betrayers.

The blood-soaked revenge tale of a woman who seized the one she loved and fell into damnation.

But hadn't the book girl told me that was only how the story appeared on the surface?

That *Undine* was the story of the sweet, nostalgic, tender, pure love of a water spirit bound by laws—

"Magical women like Shirayuki repeatedly feature in Kyōka's stories.

"The beautiful woman who transforms people into animals that the priest meets in 'The Holy Man of Mount Koya,' Tomihime from 'The Goblin's Tale' who

rejoices in receiving severed heads as souvenirs, and Ayame from *The Grass Labyrinth* who lives in a strange other world—they're all coldly cruel and terrifying to the point that the reader's spine tingles.

"But on the other hand, they all enfold the protagonists, alone of all men, in deep affection like warm water.

"Kyōka lost his mother early in life, and they say that he continually pursued her image and brought her back to life in his works through his ideal women. And the fact that many of his stories take place near water could be an allusion to the amniotic fluid of a mother's womb.

"Dozing in the water, protected by his gentle mother before he was born—he constantly wrote stories reminiscent of that kind of eerily beautiful dream.

"Kyōka was obsessed with cleanliness and he was afraid of a lot of things. He hated dogs because he was afraid of getting rabies, he was afraid of flies and bacteria, and he would never put something uncooked in his mouth. He would only drink alcohol that had been boiled to scalding, he would recook the food he ate at his hotel in his room, and any food that he ate by hand, he would leave uneaten the part he'd held it by. The word *curdle* unsettled him, so he refused to refer to tofu as 'bean curds.'

"Kyōka sought something unquestionable that would protect him from such a terror-filled world—he sought a mother. So Kyōka's heroines love the protagonists instantaneously, like mothers who embrace their newly born children with joy and dedicate their very souls to trying to shelter and heal them.

"The face of the cruel waterside goblin and the face of the deeply compassionate holy mother. Just as water can be both blessing and disaster to people, Kyōka's heroines always combine that sort of precarious duality.

"And maybe Yuri was like that, too.

"She may have been a terrifying water spirit, but at the same time she was a woman who lived for a single-minded love."

With a look as clear as water, Tohko gazed at Maki.

"No matter her reasons, the fact that Yuri killed the servants is not something we should condone. Yuri and Akira's story is cursed and drenched in blood without question. It's a somber, ghastly, cruel story that no one can redeem.

"But it's just like the way Kyōka's stories with all their focus on the grotesque, subtle, and profound can actually be beautiful love stories between men and women. I expect there existed another story behind the story of Yuri and Akira, one filled with affection and happiness and kindness.

"Kyōka's stories are a lot like dreams, but they aren't all scary; they're also beautiful and kind. The story of Yuri and Akira must have been the same.

"And perhaps because it was such a beautiful story, Sayo's grandmother continued to guard it for nearly eighty years. And so did Sayo."

Tohko turned a warm gaze on Uotani.

Tohko had gently picked up in her white hands the story that Maki had dismissed as laughable and retold it as a fleetingly beautiful story.

As if to say, "The story you and your grandmother protected is not in any way

laughable or absurd."

It was a gentle, tender story—like a dream.

Glittering water collected in Uotani's eyes.

Maki yelled, obviously aggravated, "But Akira was killed and the story had an unhappy ending. No matter how many pretty images you pick out, that's the truth! Yuri was defeated by the Himekuras, just like my father."

Tohko didn't back down.

She looked back at Maki calmly, her eyes touched with melancholy, and whispered, "You're right. In the real world, Yuri and Akira couldn't marry.

"A lot of Kyōka's love stories don't see fruition in reality, either.

"They become goblins, or they're joined in the next world…or they promise to be together in the afterlife. After watching the countess die, Takamine from 'The Surgery Room' takes his own life.

"Like the phrase about a flower glimpsed in the mirror that gave rise to his pen name—all love was like that reflected flower, like the moon floating in the water; beautiful but unobtainable, ephemeral as a dream.

"Yuri and Akira's story was also like a dream."

A love that prayed to be always together with the flower, with the moon.

But you can't touch the flower reflected in a mirror, and if you try to scoop up the moon floating in the water, it vanishes.

"We all awaken from dreams. Kyōka has Akira's friend in *Demon Pond* say that there are dreams you wish you didn't have to wake from, but no matter how hard you wish for it, you will wake up. There's no dream that won't end in waking. But you know…"

Tohko's voice held warmth, like a mother encouraging her children.

"After you wake up from a beautiful dream, the story remains in your heart.

"The dream Yuri had kept on giving her strength even after she woke up. So perhaps Yuri didn't go after Akira and instead chose to live Akira's share of reality."

Tohko's lips curved into a smile.

She turned a cute, mischievous look on Maki and asked, "Who do you think it was calling themselves Akira and studying abroad in Germany?"

Maki's eyes widened. I was confounded, too.

"Akira was supposed to have passed away and been buried in the estate's garden, so isn't it odd that he went to study abroad? But the fact that there was a Japanese student named Akira Shikishima is recorded in the letters another Japanese student sent to his family. Akira was definitely in Germany eighty years ago."

We were confused, so Tohko belted out in a vibrantly cheerful voice, "I imagine that was Yuri! Yuri studied abroad in Akira's place. Hiding her sex as Akira."

"That's absurd! Your imagination is out of control! It's not possible! She'd be exposed right away."

Maki argued forcefully.

I also found it very hard to believe.

But Tohko grinned at us like the sun, vibrantly, brilliantly.

"Not possible? No, I believe Yuri made the impossible possible. And that it was

her dreamlike story with Akira that gave her the power to do it."

She made this declaration in a cheerful voice and began telling Maki the contents of the letters from the other Japanese student that we had found out about from Ryuto.

How Akira's condition had deteriorated in the first year and how he was in convalescence afterward. How he had suffered unable to communicate. How he had applied himself intensely to study and rarely interacted with others and never drank alcohol. How he'd had a habit of touching his earlobe, had never returned to Japan once during his period of study, and had gone missing afterward.

"Would Akira, who read Goethe in the original for Yuri, have had so much trouble communicating? And can't you picture her not drinking alcohol and going back home before the sun set out of caution because she was hiding the fact that she was a woman?

"I'm sure it would attract attention if a woman was pretending to be a man in Japan, but in a foreign country at that time where Asians were still an unaccustomed sight, perhaps she was able to fool them as simply being youthfully slender and having a high voice for a man.

"So she would have *especially* avoided the other Japanese students.

"The man writes in his letter that Akira was like the moon. Perhaps it wasn't only because of his brusque attitude, but because he looked beautiful, too.

"Almost like a woman—

"Plus, apparently Akira mentioned that he'd picked up the habit of touching his earlobe from his lover, but if you consider that it was Yuri herself, it makes perfect sense."

"How did she make arrangements to get to Europe? How did she pay the fees every month? Are you suggesting a young noble lady ignorant of the world managed to live in a foreign country?"

"What if the Himekuras arranged things behind the scenes?"

Maki gasped, taken aback.

"They say there was a long period of bad luck for the Himekuras at the time, so they must have been scared of Yuri. It's totally plausible that they would have done what she told them to out of an indescribable fear and sense of guilt. Maki, you should know better than me how much power the Himekuras have. If the Himekuras were backing Yuri, my imagination all becomes reality.

"The Himekuras didn't defeat Yuri.

"On the contrary, her very existence overwhelmed them and she made a bargain.

"That is what I, the book girl, imagine!"

Maki was agape.

Of course, she would be. Tohko's story was extremely hard to believe. Even I thought it was preposterous. As if Yuri had become Akira and gone abroad!

Still, when I heard Tohko's sunny voice and saw her brightly shining eyes, I found myself thinking, *Well, it* could *have happened.*

That the story hadn't ended with Akira's death.

That Yuri went on with her life and managed to do something that would have

shocked everyone.

Uotani huddled down on the ground and burst out crying. Tears rippled down her face, her shoulders trembled, and through her sobs, she choked out, "M-my grandmother told me…that Miss Yuri had become a story.

"I would ask her, 'What happened to Miss Yuri? Where did she go?' And she would always beam at me and gently say, 'Miss Yuri became a story in the land of the dragons.'"

I am myself but a tale of one line.

The words Uotani's grandmother had told her.

I imagined what they meant and my chest thrummed with heat.

Maki's face stiffened, as if she, too, found it difficult to believe but was wavering.

Uotani covered her face with both hands and spoke, her voice thick.

"Miss Yuri…was as pretty as a dream…and she was so kind…my grandmother would always, always tell me that. I loved the stories Grandmother told about Miss Yuri…I would sneak over to the house and…I read Miss Yuri's diary so many times…I wanted to protect Miss Yuri's house."

I wondered if Uotani had put the pressed dianthus blossom in the pages.

Hearing Uotani's confession, I knew that it certainly hadn't been fear or a sense of obligation that had compelled her to become Shirayuki.

Uotani had only wanted to protect Yuri's story.

Beside the pond illuminated by the moon…

In the garden dyed in the crimson sunset…

In the tiny room, surrounded by the books Yuri had left behind, with warm light streaming in…

Perhaps Uotani had been having a lovely dream of flowers and moonlight.

Tohko bent her knees to crouch down and put her arms gently around Uotani, then stroked her hair.

"Sayo? When I finish reading a book, there are times when I've felt sad, too, as if I've woken up from a dream. The longer you've spent reading a book and the more fun you've had, the more truly bereft you feel, and you get this idea that you've been hollowed out.

"But it's not like dreams go away when you open your eyes.

"The memory of having the dream stays with you.

"And so your heart can still be warmed by that memory."

As she slowly stroked Uotani's hair over and over, Tohko talked in a kind voice that seemed to pervade the room.

"Even if you can see the flower reflected in the mirror or the moon floating in the water, you can't pick them up. If you try to take hold of either one, they vanish as if they never existed. But for that very reason, as long as we don't forget about them, they can linger in our hearts and stay beautiful forever.

"Remember what I said before?

"Even if you wake up from a dream, the story remains.

“After you’ve read a book, the story stays in your heart without fading so that you can pull up your favorite scenes again and again and read them over.

“You can cheer yourself up that way so that you can move on to the next story.

“I’m sure that’s how Yuri made it in a foreign land.”

Tohko smiled contentedly again.

“And you know—

“Yuri received one other important thing from Akira.

“She bore Akira’s child over there.”

The hands covering Uotani’s face dropped away, and she shot her eyes up to look at Tohko. Shock rose over her face still drenched with tears.

The cast of Maki’s eyes changed as well and she stared at Tohko.

“After the study abroad period was up, Akira disappeared. But someone saw him walking around holding the hand of a small child. They said the child resembled him. Perhaps the reason Akira threw up so much and had to recover during the first year of studying abroad was because of giving birth. And hurrying home before it grew dark was also because her child was waiting for her. Plus there’s a hint hidden in the rhyme that Uotani’s grandmother taught her.”

“…In the song?” Uotani murmured suspiciously.

Tohko nodded, *that’s right*, and actually hummed the words herself.

“A snake is in the swamp there.

“Rich old spirit’s little girl,

“Get you up and set a trap.

“A bead of water ’pon her neck,

“Golden shoes upon her feet,

“Call me this and call me that

“To the mountain or the field, go, go, go…”

When she finished singing, she grinned again.

“This song appears in Kyōka’s story *The Grass Labyrinth*. But there’s just one part that’s different: ‘A bead of water ’pon her neck.’ In *The Grass Labyrinth,* this part reads, ‘Two jewels in her hands.’ Sayo, your grandmother told you this song came from the land of dragons, right?”

Tears pooling in her eyes, Uotani nodded.

“She also talked about how Yuri had gone to the land of dragons, right?”

Again, she nodded.

Tohko smiled brightly.

“The land of dragons was Germany. Or rather, Yuri *misunderstood* it to be that. One of Goethe’s poems is called ‘Mignon.’ It’s a poem inserted into a longer story called *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, wherein the girl Mignon, who’s dressed as a boy, sings to the protagonist Wilhelm of her longing for the southern lands. Have you ever heard the poem that begins, ‘A land you know where lemon flowers bloom’? She wants to go to the land where oranges glow, where rows of bay trees grow, and the myrtle blooms with someone she cares for. She says there’s also an ancient herd of dragons that live in caves in that land—

“Yuri probably had Akira teach her this poem.

“Actually, the land to the south was Italy. But Yuri got the idea that it was Germany. When Akira proposed to her and said they should go to Germany together, she asked him if she could plant lemons and myrtle, and he’d laughed at her.

“Even so, for Yuri the land to the south was Germany. So perhaps that’s what she told her friend Chiro, too. That she was going to the land of dragons.”

“How is that connected to Yuri having a baby?”

Still smiling, Tohko answered my question.

“The fact that the song came from the land of dragons—that meant it was a message that had arrived from Yuri, who’d gone over to Germany. They say children are occasionally born in the Himekura family with a birthmark shaped like a dragon’s scale. Perhaps the bead of water was pointing to that mark.

“In other words, Yuri was informing Chiro that a child had been born with a mark shaped like a bead of water on its neck.”

I recalled the birthmark on the nape of Maki’s neck.

A vivid purple, scale-shaped mark rising out of her white skin. Very much like a drop of water that had fallen from the sky—

Tohko’s eyes sparkled.

“Do you understand how important that fact was for Yuri?

“There was no question that Yuri’s child had Himekura blood. It had the birthmark to prove it.

“Yuri wasn’t a child conceived in her mother’s affair. Akira had given Yuri memories, a new life, and proof that she was a true daughter of the Himekuras.”

Maki abruptly shouted, “That’s just what you imagine happened!”

Maki was pale and her gaze roved about restlessly; she was acting extremely panicked and confused.

“A child? *A birthmark on its throat?* That— It would never— You don’t even have any proof that Yuri studied abroad as Akira, and yet—”

Just then, a cheerful voice spoke up from near the door.

“In that case, I’ll give you one more *fact*.”

“Ryuto!”

When she saw Ryuto come strolling in, Maki raised her eyebrows.

“Wh-why did you come back here?!”

“I got some new info, so I thought I’d come by. But I was holdin’ back ’cos it looked like you were in the middle of somethin’.”

How long had he been there?

Maki’s eyes were bugging out as Ryuto came close enough almost to touch her, then tilted his face slightly and with a grin showed her the cell phone dangling from his fingers.

“I found out the name of the person who sponsored Akira when he was abroad. Shuichiro Kusakabe—one of the branches of the Himekuras—and oh, that’s right, isn’t that also the name of your grandpa’s chaperone?”

An intense shock came over Maki’s face.

The one who’d sponsored Akira’s study abroad had been someone with ties to the Himekuras!

That was a huge element backing up Tohko's imagined scenario. Her imagination was getting closer to reality.

That Yuri had actually used the Himekuras to go over to Germany and live as Akira. And if that were true, her other imagining—the idea that Yuri had given birth to Akira's child—wasn't out of the question, either. In fact, that story had much more of an air of truth to it than the one about studying abroad.

Maki laughed out loud, which startled me.

Her face was lowered at first, and she chuckled harshly in a low voice. But her secretive laughter gradually grew brighter and higher until she threw her head back, her cheeks and lips curved up impressively, and she guffawed as if she were more overjoyed than she could bear.

Ryuto was right next to her, so of course he was startled, but Tohko, Uotani, and I all stared at Maki with him.

You were looking all frigid and moody five seconds ago so what exactly changed, Maki?!

"Ha-ha-ha, really? So a Kusakabe sponsored Akira. So Yuri had a baby. I'm sure that child is now my despised grandfather. My grandfather who's got some Oedipal complex and keeps chasing after the phantom of his mommy, just like Kyōka."

I didn't get it. I was clueless.

But Maki was in incredibly high spirits. It was like a glittering aura of the vital energy that filled her was pouring out of her entire being.

"That's great! What a wonderful story. I'll have good dreams for the first time in a long while tonight! I'm sure when I wake up tomorrow, I'll feel like anything's possible."

"Hey, hey, no plottin' to take over the world now," Ryuto said with a shrug and started to walk off.

Maki called out to him.

"You leaving? Where are you going?"

"I've got a pretty lady waitin' for me in town."

"I really do think you'd be better off dead."

"If I found a woman who'd kill me, definitely."

He smiled, enjoying Maki's annoyance, and said, "Oh, right, I came with a message to deliver. 'The armada's preparations are complete.'"

Who on earth was that message from? Ryuto wouldn't say, but it looked as though Maki understood immediately.

Her eyes widened slightly in surprise, and then a predatory smile came immediately over her face.

"I really…don't like you."

Ryuto grinned once more, waved his hand casually, then left.

Afterward, I thought maybe Takamizawa had given Ryuto the message.

That maybe Ryuto had been the guest who'd called at the inn…but somehow or other, I kept that to myself.

Epilogue—I Know That I'll Be Smiling

Early in the morning, something jolted my body and I was forcibly woken up.

"Konohaaaaaa, wake uuuup, wake uuuuup."

A tragic voice echoed over my head. When I blearily opened my eyes, Tohko's lip was trembling. She was wearing a white dress with its front buttons one button off and her hair mussed by sleep.

"Wake up, wake up, wake uuuuup."

She rocked me from side to side, *shake-shake-shake-shake*, like a boat on rough seas, and I couldn't even pretend to be asleep, so I moaned, "What is it? It's too early. Did you see another ghost?"

With tears in her eyes, Tohko appealed to me.

"I…I…I remembered something terrible! What am I going to do, Konoha?"

Thirty minutes later, I was doing math problems in Tohko's room.

"The new semester starts next week! How could you not even *look* at your homework over the summer? Do you think you're still in elementary school?"

"Urgggggggggh. But, but, but just when I decided I would start tackling it, I got brought here and things have been so busy, I haven't had any tiiiiiiiiime."

While Tohko sniveled, I buried her in handouts on world history.

"Oh, for— There isn't a mark on even a single *question* out of these."

"I'm bad at math."

"You should make yourself work harder on the things you're bad at, don't you think? There are still things I haven't learned yet in second year, so I can only solve half of these."

"That's okay. I could only solve half of half of half of half of that."

"At the point where you're forcing your underclassman to do your homework for you, nothing's okay. You're studying for your college exams, Tohko!"

Although since she was probably just going to target illustrious literature programs, I could understand if she didn't feel like expending a lot of energy on math and science at this point.

"Humph, right now we need to focus on the homework staring us in the face, not my exams. It's totally impossible to finish this by next week! Please, Konoha, do the assignments in the reader for me toooo? You're translating a whole book."

"No way. If I translate it, you'll just eat it like when you swiped that Bradbury story from me."

"I-I wouldn't do that. C'mon, I'll write your literature papers for you."

"I don't need you to. I finished all my homework in July. My essay was on 'The

Fall of the House of Usher.'"

"Whaaaat? Konoha, you're weird! That's so unlike a student in the leisure generation!"

"You're *too* leisurely, Tohko!"

Tohko pouted and said I was so mean to her, but when I said, "I can stop helping you with your homework," she quieted down instantly.

She started going through the next handout obediently, but…

"Konoha…I'm hungry."

Her voice soon rang out again pathetically, and her eyes watered.

"Good point."

I stood up.

"Are you going to write something for me?!"

"I'm going to eat breakfast. You keep doing your homework while I'm gone."

"Are you kidding?! Wait! Just half a page is all I need! Write something before you go. I finished *Tonio Kröger* and *Undiiiiiine*."

"You still have *Alt Heidelberg*, though," I told her brusquely and left the room.

If I let her win me over, she'd start pushing it and her demands would only get worse.

The kitchen was empty.

That was only natural since the servants Maki had hired had left. I guess I had to find something to eat for myself.

"Um…g-good morning."

I turned around at the hesitant voice and saw Uotani standing there shyly in a T-shirt and miniskirt.

"Morning. You're not in your uniform today, huh?"

Uotani turned shy.

"I was thirsty so I came to get some water. And then you were here. Um, I'll get your breakfast for you."

"That's okay. I'm sure you're tired, too."

"No, I'm awake now. It used to be I would always have a headache or a stomachache when I woke up, but today I felt totally great. I didn't even dream about the rhyme…"

"Oh yeah?"

A smile came naturally to my lips, too.

Uotani took out eggs, lettuce, and a cucumber and started arranging them on the counter.

"I can make the salad."

I stood beside her and picked up the lettuce.

"Thank you. Um, is French toast and an omelet all right?"

"Yeah. I really like French toast."

Uotani skillfully cracked and mixed the eggs and cut up the bread, and beside her I chopped the lettuce.

"I…haven't been to school in a long time. Ever since my grandmother died and I

started pretending to be Shirayuki, I've been different from the other kids. Having an important role to play…I…chose to escape into a dreamworld."

She whisked the eggs, milk, and sugar together, then soaked the bread in it. When she set the bread onto a frying pan with melted butter on it, there was a *hiss!* and it gave off a sweet aroma.

"But from now on…"

When the bread browned, she flipped it over and smiled.

"Because I've gotten courage from my dreams…I can move forward living in reality, too."

The story of Yuri and Akira that Tohko had told had given Uotani the strength to face her future.

"That's a great thing."

When I told her that, feeling refreshed as if a balmy breeze was blowing around me, Uotani got shy again and murmured, "…Thank you."

I was sure the beautiful dream she'd had would stay in her heart as a precious treasure.

The French toast and omelet were both grilled to a beautiful golden color, and I'd finished my salad, too.

We ate them in the kitchen.

Uotani wanted to know about Tokyo, so I told her about it.

"That sounds great. I'd like to go sometime."

The way she sighed with a look of yearning on her face was like any other first-year middle school girl.

"Yuri managed to go to Germany, so when you get older, you could go anywhere you wanted."

"You're right."

Uotani nodded, her face bright.

Then she grew suddenly shy and her cheeks flushed, and she looked up at me, fidgeting.

"Um, actually…could I…write you letters?"

Wha—? The atmosphere had changed all of a sudden…

And just then, from behind us came a rueful voice, and heavy, damp air rolled in.

"So cruuuuuuuel… How can you be so cruuuuuuuuuel?"

Ack, *she'd appeared*!

Tohko clung to the doorframe, sticking only half of her face in, her lip trembling.

Uotani let out a quiet shriek.

"You're so cruuuuuuuel, Konoha. I've been waiting, letting my stomach grumble and churn, but you're enjoying your meal without meeee."

Tohko was whining, "I'll haunt yooooou, I'll curse yooooou," but I calmed her down and went back to the room, then turned over the cover on my notebook.

"Geez, can you not act quite so embarrassing? You scared Uotani."

"But, but, but—I really was hungry. I thought I was gonna diiiiiiie."

"Sure, sure. I'll write you something now, so just do your homework, please."

"Hurry, okay? Hurry…"

Tohko begged me from across the table, making a face as if she were nearing death. Her eyes watered tearfully as she gripped her mechanical pencil.

Geez, there was no fixing her.

But it was way better than having her lose her spirits and look sad.

All of a sudden, I recalled the words Ryuto had told me.

The words to cheer Tohko up…

"…I guess the rest is up to the skill of the cook. You'll be fine, Konoha. You're Tohko's author."

I wasn't Tohko's author or anything. But as I folded in the three words I'd gotten from Ryuto, like a magic spell, I wrote up a short story on three pages of the notebook.

"All done. Here you go."

Feeling tenser than usual, I held the pages out to her.

"Thank you."

Tohko took them in both hands, then quickly set about tearing them up and eating them.

"It's so *sweet*!"

Tohko's face broke into a smile immediately.

"It's like eating scoops of honey with a golden spoon. Sunny nectar is trickling down the back of my throat. Two people are trying to tell each other how they feel in the early years of the century. Their social ranks are different, a student and a young noble lady, so neither of them can speak of it, but they're content just to walk side by side through a meadow in the summertime…Content just to hear the other's voice… Content simply to have the other's smile nearby…"

I watched her go into raptures, crinkling her way through the pages, and even as I felt relieved that she seemed to like it, my chest felt a little itchy with embarrassment that maybe it was a little too sweet.

Just then, I noticed that Tohko had a weird look on her face.

Her cheeks had turned ever so slightly red, her eyes were watering, and a melancholy breath escaped her partly opened lips.

"Konoha…does this have…a little…alcohol in it?"

She had less than half a page left. She was right at the closing scene where the ill-fated pair overcome the barriers of their rank and finally join their hearts together.

"Confession," "kiss," "embrace."

And then "confession," "confession," "kiss," "confession," "kiss," "kiss," "kiss," "embrace."

With each bite she took, her face grew redder and redder, her eyebrows scrunched together, and sighs slipped from her lips.

I was astonished seeing Tohko this way.

She couldn't actually be drunk, though!

Tohko was by now bright red from her neck to her ears. Her fingertips were trembling and as soon as she swallowed the last piece, her body tumbled forward.

"Tohko…!"

I saw her crumple to her knees on the floor and I hurried over to her.

"Are you okay?!"

"…Not really."

She flopped down onto her belly, as if all the energy had gone out of her, then she lifted her face, and with her eyes on the verge of tears, she said, "I'm not okay…I'm gonna sing."

"Huh?"

Tohko stood up abruptly, and as she sang "The Raccoons of Shojoji Temple," she drummed on her stomach with both hands.

I stood there agape as she took my arm and urged me, "C'mon, Konoha, join in," and then she sang buoyantly, slurring the words, "Bum-ba-ba-bum-BUM!" and giggled.

She was drunk, totally drunk. Augh, what was I going to do?!

Dancing on unsteady legs, Tohko grabbed onto my collar and clung to me. "How come y'won't dance with me?"

But just as soon, she said, "Heh, you're always like that, Konoha. You're so mean."

And now her face fell and her eyes filled with tears.

"What did I do that was so mean?"

"I…can't tell you."

My heart skipped a beat.

Tohko's face scrunched up desolately, and then she suddenly pushed away from me and turned her back on me.

"No…absolutely not. I can't say…It would be bad."

She hung her head and shook it back and forth rapidly.

"Please tell me."

"No way…"

"Why not?"

"Because…I can't say because…because it's you."

The way she continued stubbornly shaking her head was like the countess in "The Surgery Room" refusing to have anesthesia used on her.

The beautiful countess who had appealed to the doctor, telling him that she had a secret that so obsessed her, if her mind wandered under anesthesia, she was sure she would blurt something out.

What was it that Tohko couldn't tell me? Or was she just drunk and rambling? That must be it. There wasn't any deeper meaning.

Ah, but…hadn't something like this happened awhile ago, too? When I was still a first-year, Tohko suddenly got all shifty and told me not to get close to her, and then she was out with a cold for a little while after that. But when she got better and came

back to school, she'd been smiling with a carefree look on her face.

I was uneasy and my chest was throbbing. It was nagging at me, so I stood behind Tohko and patiently asked, "Why can't you tell me? Did I do something wrong? If you don't tell me what I did, I can't apologize."

Tohko covered her mouth firmly with both hands, as if to show she would never talk, and closed her eyes tightly. I grabbed her hands from behind and pulled them away.

"Tohko?"

Tohko suddenly whirled to face me and fell against me.

She swiftly laid her hot forehead near my heart.

"I hate, hate, hate, hate, hate you, Konoha! You are *SO* mean."

Squeezing my arms tightly, she repeated herself like a child.

"Underclassmen have to listen to what their seniors tell them."

"I am listening. Or more like being forced to listen."

"Liar. You're just gonna make fun of me."

Another squeeze of strength went into the fingers gripping my arm.

The hiccup in her throat was probably because she was swallowing her rising tears. Her eyes still closed sadly, she was trembling slightly, as if she was holding up against something.

She whispered something in a cracked voice, but it was too quiet and I couldn't hear her.

"What did you say?"

Silence.

"Please say it again."

I drew my face closer in an effort to somehow pick it out, when a sharp pain ran through the back of my right hand.

Tohko had bitten my hand.

As if to stop herself from letting the secret pass her lips.

She'd bitten me fiercely, her eyes closed hard and tight enough to wrinkle her forehead.

My brain grew hot as if I was intoxicated, and I felt dizzy.

Tohko didn't move, her teeth still biting into my hand. Her slender fingers squeezed my arm so tightly that it hurt.

My head grew hotter and hotter, even my ears grew hot, the beating of my heart increasing to a thud, and just as it felt as if my heart was about to burst, Tohko's body lurched to one side this time.

"Ack!"

I almost tilted over with her but hurriedly caught her and held her up.

The tension broke suddenly, and I yelled, "You're just going to fall asleep now? What were you going to say?!"

After that, I dragged Tohko to her bed and put her to sleep, then worked on more of the math problems.

Occasionally Tohko would gum the edge of her blanket, and I would watch her out of the corner of my eye and sigh.

When Maki came to the room after noon, Tohko was still sound asleep.

"This is a perfect opportunity granted by the gods," she said joyously, then took a lily from a vase and stuck it into Tohko's hair, opened her sketchbook, and started drawing.

"I got to look at Tohko's adorable face as much as I wanted; I have a story to tell Grandpa—it's been a good summer vacation."

"It was rough for me, being jerked around by you two."

Maki chuckled.

"Didn't you make some good memories, too? Sharing a bed with Tohko, for instance?"

"I wish you wouldn't say it like that—someone might get the wrong idea!"

Maki laughed again. Downtrodden, I asked, "Maki, did you drag Tohko into this fuss because she resembles Yuri?"

"I did. With me, the image of Yuri from the diary would have just been obliterated. Tohko was upset that I was making her play the ghoul, but I was the one in that role."

Uotani had seen Yuri in Tohko, too. That was probably why she'd called her Miss Yuri when Tohko appeared totally drenched.

"But you know…it wasn't just that. I may have been a little lonesome, too. Maybe that's why I wanted to have Tohko here."

What a surprise. It sounded as if Maki was talking openly about her feelings.

Wait—speaking of, her clothes were a little different, too… She was wearing a blue dress and looked very feminine. Was this the first time I'd seen her out of uniform in something other than pants?

Maki closed her sketchbook and stood up.

"I'm heading out now."

"Where are you going?"

"I hate to leave a debt unpaid, so I'm paying it back hard."

"Wha—?"

Maki winked at me cheerfully without telling me anything more.

"I'm going to be late getting back, so this is your chance, Konoha."

"My chance for *what* exactly?!"

She laughed tauntingly and then went away.

My shoulders slumped.

A little after that, Tohko woke up, but this time the first thing out of her mouth was, "I feel awful…and my head is throbbing. Konoha…write me a story that tastes like plum wine…"

She begged, lying listlessly on the bed, and that was the end of it.

She didn't remember biting my hand at all.

"Do you recognize this?"

Even when I showed her the tooth marks left on the back of my hand and scowled at her…

"Ummmmm, hmmmmm…did you get pinched by a stag beetle?"

All she did was give an answer out of left field while moaning.

Around the time it started to get dark outside the windows, Tohko finally became able to get up, and as expected, her cheeks flushed pink and she apologized awkwardly.

"I'm sorry, Konoha. It was so sudden…I guess I couldn't hold my liquor. And then…um…"

She flicked her eyes up at me worriedly.

"I…didn't say anything weird to you, did I?"

"Like what?"

I lured her in.

"Like that it wasn't just Bradbury—I secretly tore up and ate your Vonnegut translation from your English notes, too, or that I tasted just a corner off of a Li Bai poem from your notes on Chinese classics, or that I told Nanase your height, weight, birthday, blood type, and measurements."

"Hold on—" I shouted. "What d'you mean Vonnegut and Li Bai?! And what kind of conversations are you and Kotobuki having?!"

"I'm soooooorry. I oversold your height by an inch, so don't be mad."

She had resisted answering so much, but *that* was what she hadn't been able to tell me?!

I was done. Utterly done.

"C'mon, Konoha, don't be mad at me."

We were walking down a forest path illuminated by the moonlight after our evening meal.

I'd been so ticked off that I told Tohko, "I'm not helping you with your homework anymore. I'm going for a walk," and I'd grabbed the flashlight and gone out. Tohko had come slinking after me.

"Konoha…c'mon, Konoha…"

She was calling pathetically behind me.

"Wait, Konoha."

She tugged sharply on the hem of my shirt.

"I was worried about you."

"Huh?"

"Ever since you came here, you've been down pretty much the whole time and made sad faces, and you'll call me mean or say, 'No!' out of nowhere."

My back and face both grew hotter, and I was so embarrassed I just wanted to get away. I could *not*, absolutely could *not*, turn around.

Tohko was silent. Maybe this time Tohko was the one who was fed up with me.

"Don't even worry about it."

I was just about to walk quicker to get ahead when Tohko popped her head out from one side and looked up at me.

I almost died from shock, but she gave me a smile, her entire face filled with joy.

"Thank you, Konoha."

"Wh-whatever."

I wanted to look away, but she was beaming so happily that I found myself captivated.

"I'm sorry I made you worry. It's like you said, I've been a teensy bit erratic. Maybe because I read Yuri's diary."

"The diary? But Akira *didn't* throw Yuri aside, right? He proposed to her and suggested they go to Germany together, and Yuri said yes, and the two of them promised to get married."

Tohko walked ahead slowly, her placid expression offering a sort of poignancy.

I walked beside her.

"You're right, Yuri did say yes. She even wrote in the diary that she was the happiest person in the world. But I suspected that maybe Yuri had made up her mind to stay in the mansion alone and wouldn't have gone with Akira."

Surprised, I asked, "Why did you think that?"

Tohko looked up at the moon, her eyes soft.

"Maybe…because Yuri had drawn a picture of herself smiling in the middle of a room lined with books."

"I don't get it. Why would drawing a picture mean she would stay?"

"Not drawing a picture, drawing a picture of her smiling among books.

"I felt like that was Yuri's declaration that she would watch him go and go on living in that room with a smile.

"Like maybe that was the promise Yuri had made to herself…"

Her warm voice flowed into the quiet night.

Her black eyes were fixed on the distant moon.

"I think Yuri knew quite well that the Himekuras wouldn't stay quiet if she left the estate and that it would cause problems for Akira. It was so unbearably sad to separate herself from Akira that Yuri's heart nearly ripped in two.

"But she wanted to protect him. She truly was happy that Akira proposed to her and that was a life's worth of happiness.

"That's why she was going to watch Akira leave on his distant journey.

"To go on from that point smiling and thinking of Akira. That's…how I pictured it…"

As she whispered, Tohko's lips curved in a gentle smile.

"Something wonderful happened. I won't ever grieve again. I'm the happiest person in the world."

"I made a promise with Akira.

"An important promise.

"I nodded, 'all right.'"

"When I asked if I could grow lemon trees and myrtle, he laughed at me. Akira's dear laugh that I'll never forget for the rest of my life."

After that, I retreated to my room and painted a picture with watercolors.

"A solid wall of books. Right in the middle of it, there's me, smiling happily, radiant, more contented than anyone."

"I made a promise to myself, too.

"This one is different from the others. It's a promise that will never be broken.

"Since I was able to meet Akira, I know that I'll be smiling for the rest of my life."

Yuri's words resurfaced in my mind in Tohko's voice.

I remembered Tohko with her sad eyes looking down at the diary at dawn, and my chest tightened.

The image of Yuri smiling in the center of the book room overlapped with the way Tohko was smiling chastely, looking up at the moon that floated in the sky.

The image of Tohko overlapped with Yuri, who had chosen to live her life alone for Akira's sake.

Yuri was smiling.

Tohko was smiling.

I didn't know what it was about Yuri's life that Tohko had found so sympathetic that she'd made such a sad face. Only that washed in the wan moonlight, Tohko was

incredibly pretty, and—

The smile resting on her white face was so kind it made my heart tremble, and she was like a resident of a fantasy world, and—

It seemed that if I reached out my hand, it would pass through her slender body, and—

A trembling sort of anxiety was welling up in me, and I stood frozen when—

Tohko abruptly looked at me, winked cutely, and took my hand.

Like a mother holding a small child's hand.

She squeezed it naturally.

As if to tell me, "See? I'm here. It's all right. I'll be at your side whenever you need me."

At the moist warmth I felt on my palm, a black, heavy mist that hung in my heart lifted and I was filled with ease.

Our hands still joined, Tohko began to walk.

Slowly, slowly, the braided book girl walked down the moonlit road.

"I'm sure Yuri was glad she could meet him. There were a lot of painful, sad events, but I'm sure of that."

"I'm glad I was able to meet him."

I'm glad I was able to share this dream with you.

Even if it was a dream as ephemeral as a flower reflected in a mirror, as the moon floating in the water.

Even though I know the time will come to wake eventually.

I'm glad.

I'm glad I was able to meet you.

I was happy.

Yuri's feelings channeled through Tohko's words tinged my heart.

The southern land Yuri reached after she lost Akira was definitely not a land of joyful dreams. The war was starting, and there were probably many difficult, painful things that happened there.

Even so, just by remembering those beautiful days, she could smile.

I suppose there can be encounters like that.

Though I still didn't really understand.

Even if they parted ways, even if they couldn't see each other. As if it had all transformed into a gentle story of but one line.

Surely the flower and the moon would rest forever in her heart.

"We got scared a little, too, but it was a good summer vacation," Tohko said.

"Maki said the same thing. You two are on the same wavelength."

"What?! We are not. Forget I said that."

Tohko pouted intensely.

After complaining for quite a while, her eyes turned suddenly gentle and she murmured, “But…I won’t forget it,” and smiled. “After all, you were here with me, Konoha.”

Her words, her look, both made my chest squeeze tight.

“I won’t forget it, either. You getting me here with a telegram, getting kicked in the head all those times, being forced to buy you presents for your birthday that was almost six months ago, lending you money to buy souvenirs…”

“I’ll pay you back,” Tohko whined again.

We walked in that mood toward the pond.

When I’d been in peril yesterday, it had been pitch-dark, but tonight the moonlight streamed between the trees and created a fantastical atmosphere.

“We might run into Yuri and Akira’s ghosts here.”

“Geez, Konoha, I can’t believe you’re trying to scare me. I’m not going to fall for it.”

Tohko giggled.

“Ah, on a perfect moonlit night like this, Yuri and Akira’s souls might want to come down to earth and go on a date!” she said excitedly, swinging our clasped hands slightly.

Soon the pond opened up beyond the trees.

The surface of the water drank in the moonlight and glittered silver. It was as if there were a moon on the surface of the earth, too.

Tohko was probably so moved she couldn’t put it into words. She opened her mouth slightly beside me.

Just then—

Splash!

The sound of water clapped against our ears.

That was too big to be a fish…The thought was just crossing my mind when waves rippled on the water’s surface and a silver spray rose into the air. Through the sparkling drops, I could see a coupled shadow embracing.

A girl with long, wet hair had her arms around a man’s neck, and the man was pulling the woman’s body against his. They were entangled, kissing.

Neither of them were wearing clothes!

It was just the briefest moment that I was able to make out that bizarre scene.

That was because a cloud obscured the moon and in a moment the two were hidden behind a veil of darkness.

“Eeeeeeeeeeee! It’s theeeeeeeeem!!”

Tohko shouted and jerked her hand out of mine and ran from the scene.

“It’s a ghost, a ghost, I saw Yuri and Akira’s ghosts! Noooo! If you’re gonna possess someone, take Konoha, not meeee!”

After Tohko abandoned me and fled, she went back to the house, buried her head under the blankets, and spent the whole night shuddering.

“Now what? I saw a ghost. No, no, no, what if they come here?”

When the sky began to lighten finally after all this, she said, “Get up, Konoha, get uuuup.”

She shook me the way she had the day before.

“Hurry up and pack. I can’t stay in a place like this another night. Let’s go home.”

“What? Right now?! I mean, dressed like that?”

Tohko was dressed in her school uniform.

“This is how I was dressed when I was brought here. Hurry, Konoha. The ghosts might coooooooome.”

Tohko hurried me along, half sobbing, and I was stuffing my things into my bag when Maki came in.

She looked as if she’d had a morning bath with a towel wound around her hair and wearing a robe. She had alluring red marks around her collarbone and chest—maybe they were bug bites?—and I didn’t know where to look.

“What’s wrong? Why are you in such a hurry?”

“We’re going home now, good-bye.”

At that, Maki grinned.

“My, my, you’re that scared? *Did you see a ghost, perchance?*”

Tohko jumped in shock.

“N-n-n-n-no, I didn’t. There’s no such thing as ghosts. I just remembered there’s an alumni meeting for the book club today! Everything ready, Konoha? Okay, let’s go.”

“Are you taking the train back? I’ll have someone drive you.”

“That’s okay.”

“Do you have money?”

“Ryuto brought me some.”

“Ah. I’ll see you next semester, then.”

Maki watched us go with a crafty smile, her arms still crossed.

“Tohko, if you have money, then could you give me back what I loaned you at the souvenir shop?”

“After we get back to safety.”

As we started out the front door, Tohko hurrying me along, a voice called out behind us.

“Hey, Tohko, Konoha, ya leavin’ already? And what’s with the uniform, Tohko?”

Ryuto appeared wearing jeans and a raggedy tank top, his hair wet.

“Ryuto? Did you stay the night here? Didn’t you go into town?”

“Y’know, there was all this stuff goin’ on.”

An ambiguous smile came over Ryuto’s face.

“I’m going home a little early, but you’re coming back, too, before the second semester starts. Not dillydallying with girls.”

“You’re the one who called me out here and everythin’.”

I deeeeefinitely understood the feeling behind his wry smile.

Taking him aside, I complained, “Ryuto, you knew what would happen to Tohko if I wrote those words.”

A playful glint came into his eyes.

"So ya tried it? It was worth me teachin' ya. She's had a weakness for lush, kinda old-fashioned words since for*ever*. When she ate *Bed of Dead Leaves* or whatever by Mori Mari, she danced around all happily and sang 'The Raccoons of Shojoji Temple.' So I didn't lie to ya."

She definitely had danced around singing the drumbeats from that song, but…

"Ryuto! What are you saying to Konoha?!"

Tohko must have sensed that it wasn't anything good and raised her voice.

Ryuto shrugged, a mischievous look on his face.

"Well, look after Tohko for me, will ya, Konoha?"

With that he gave my back a push toward Tohko, then waved and watched us go.

Geez, why can't you take her home? You live in the same house.

As Ryuto grinned, I noticed that he had the same bug bites on his neck as Maki, but—

"Konoha, come on! The train's gonna leave…"

Tohko called to me, and I ran off.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming."

In the immaculate morning light, the book girl was waiting for me, pouting, her hands on her hips.

Summer vacation was over and we went back to our lukewarm, placid, cozy everyday lives.

In later years, Maki bore a child and even got married.

Her fiancé was not someone her grandfather chose, but rather someone that we all knew and thought, *No way!*

But Maki chose him as her partner of her own free will.

I will rest my hand from my work and look back upon that summer.

To the fact that she was always there, in the cool billows of the breeze, in the brilliant light, on the path illuminated by the moon.

To the way she smiled cheerfully, her long black hair hanging loose, her delicate body clothed in a white dress.

And then her white profile, her eyes lowered sadly, as she held a secret in her heart that she couldn't tell me…

When I imagine the secret conflict and sadness that jolted inside her heart that summer, my chest tightens with warmth and melancholy.

The final promise I shared with her as she went to graduation, the shred of hatred she left me with, the pain—they all reawaken sweetly.

The transformation had already begun that summer.

Like a flower, like the moon, like a dream—that summer truly was special.

I look at a clock and see that it's already three in the afternoon.

She's probably getting tea ready in the kitchen. From time to time, I can hear the

sound of pattering footsteps or the sound of drawers opening and closing.

She was fired up, telling me, “Today I’ll make lemon pie. It’s sour and delicious.”

I gave her a copy of my key, so almost every day she comes to this apartment that’s my office-slash-home and looks after me.

She’s tried to convince me before that it was a lot of trouble for her and maybe she would just move in. Our friends often needled us, “You oughta just marry her.”

Soon the door will open and she’ll call me over.

I put the manuscript I’m working on aside, close the word processor, and stand up.

“You will not know me.”

The summer that one line from “The Surgery Room” fell from her lips with poignancy has passed into distant history.

But I can still remember the surprise and pain I felt when she bit the back of my hand.

And the many stories she gave me.

So in my heart I whisper.

Filled with all the gratitude and affection in the world for my dear book girl.

I won’t forget you—

AFTERWORD

Hello, Mizuki Nomura here. The sixth volume of the Book Girl series is its first side story!

In terms of the time line, it falls after the second book, but the subject matter is a forecast of the seventh book, so I'm perfectly happy if you read it in the order it was published.

The inspiration this time for Tohko and Konoha's memorable summer plus the Maki file is Kyōka Izumi's *Demon Pond*. I also made use of *The Grass Labyrinth* and "The Surgery Room." Kyōka's vocabulary and plotting are powerfully beautiful. His writing is unique and parts of it are hard to read, but the beauty of the words and scenarios flying into your mind will make your head spin. The plots and settings are often truuuuuly wonderful, so it might be better to get an idea of the story before the difficult parts and then experience the flavor of the prose.

I quoted an Emily Brontë poem in the opening illustrations again. I love this poem and it suited Maki perfectly, so I really wanted to use it in the story this time *and* in the second book! Just as I was surrendering in tears, my editor unexpectedly suggested, "Why not use it in the opening illustration?" and I begged to do it. They use it in the main theme for a TV drama called *Hagetaka*, too. I've been a fan of the writers for a while now, and whenever the song played in a scene, I was soooooooo moved.

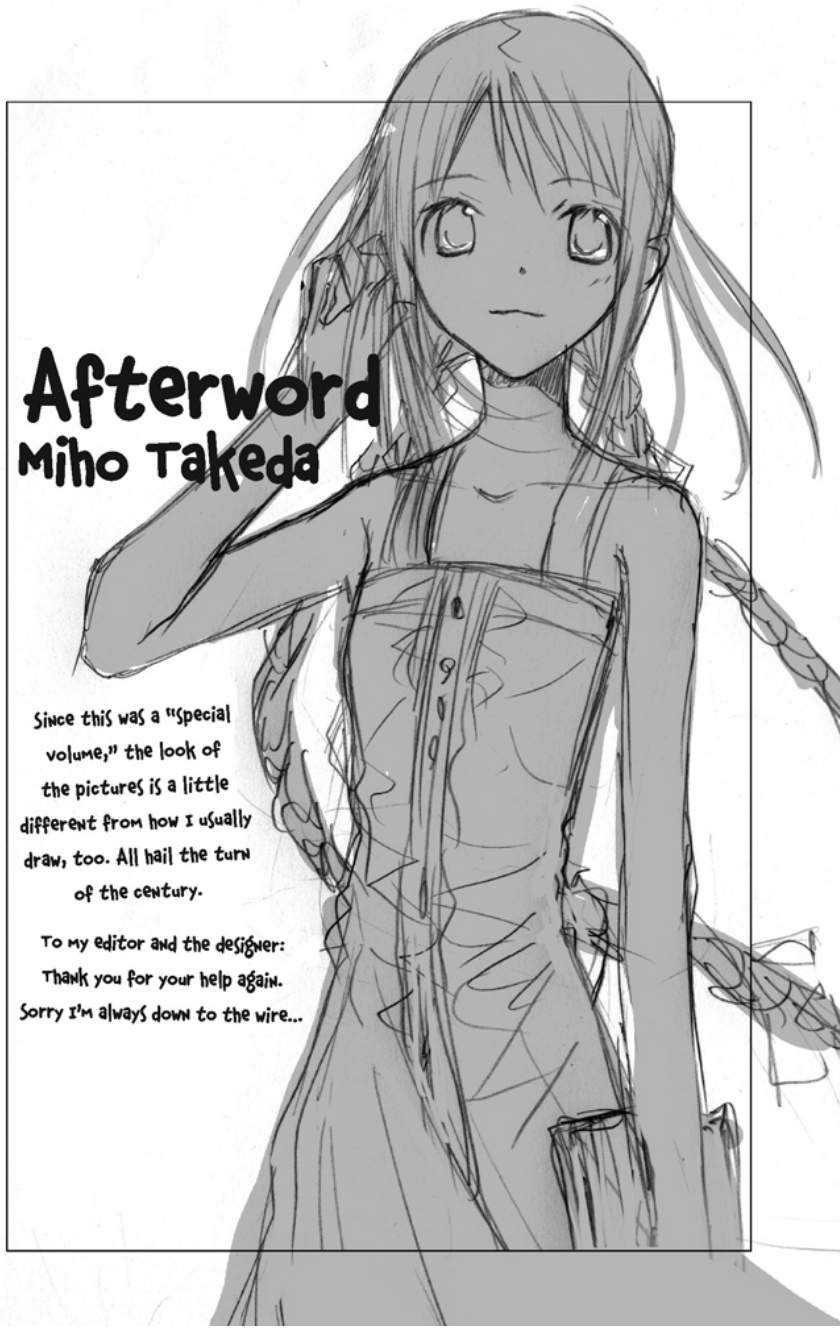
Once again, I'm running out of room in the afterword. Ms. Takeoka—our illustrator—the "curry restaurant" Tohko from your afterword in the fifth book was *SO* cute! That hairstyle, just oh, my gosh. I finally offered you Tohko out of uniform, so I'm definitely looking forward to seeing how the drawings turn out!

I have an announcement for the readers. This year, *Book Girl* was once again third overall in Takarajima Publishing's *This Light Novel Is Amazing!* Tohko won second place in the female character category! Kotobuki was eighth, Konoha was seventh for male characters, and Ms. Takeoka was second in the illustrators' category!

Thank you so much to everyone who voted! I'm going to turn my attention to the graduation volume now and do my best, so I hope you'll stay with us to the end. I'd like to put out a few short-story collections, which a lot of people asked about. I'm currently accepting requests for stories you'd like to see. Okay, see you!

Mizuki Nomura

November 27, 2007



Afterword

Miho Takeda

Since this was a "special volume," the look of the pictures is a little different from how I usually draw, too. All hail the turn of the century.

To my editor and the designer: Thank you for your help again. Sorry I'm always down to the wire...

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